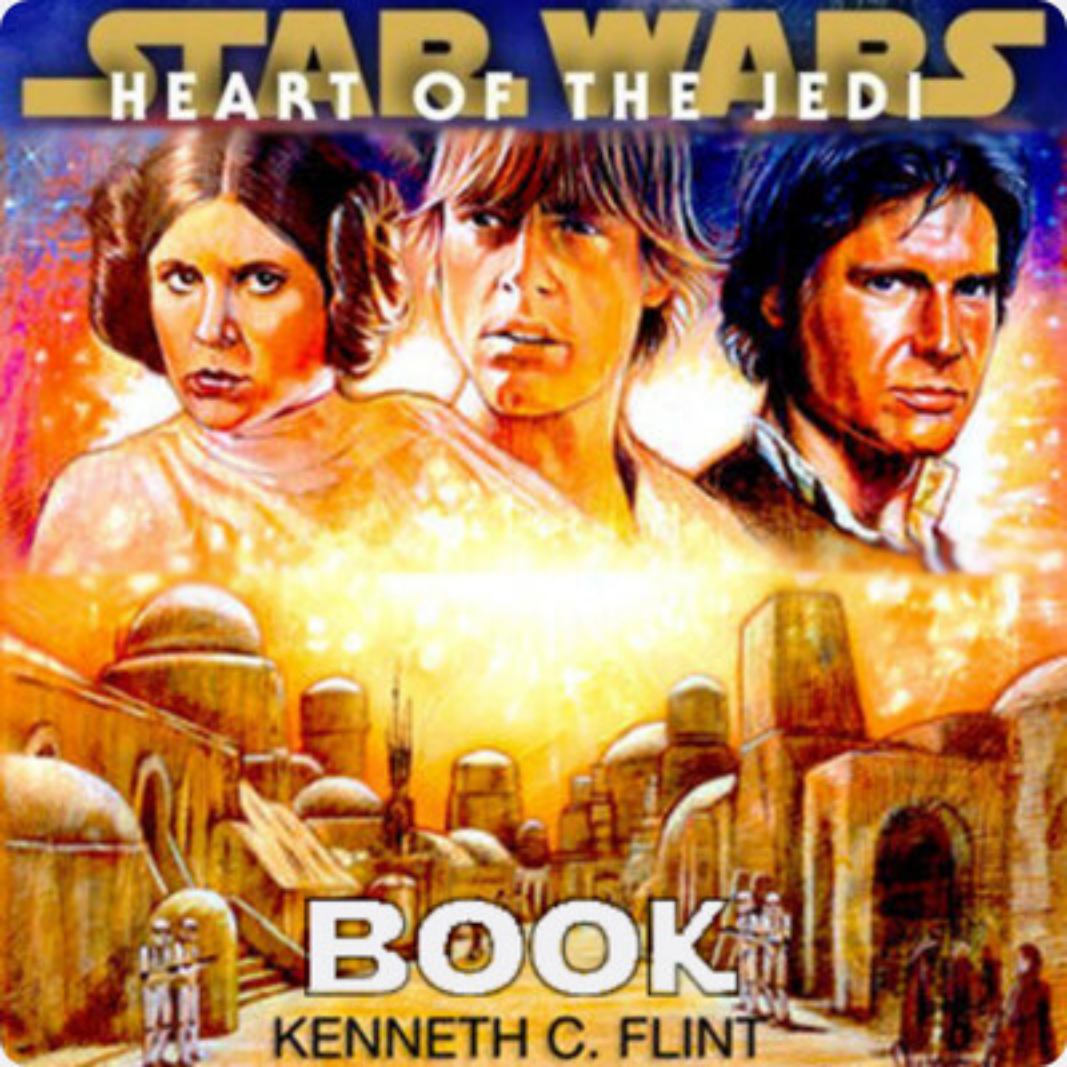
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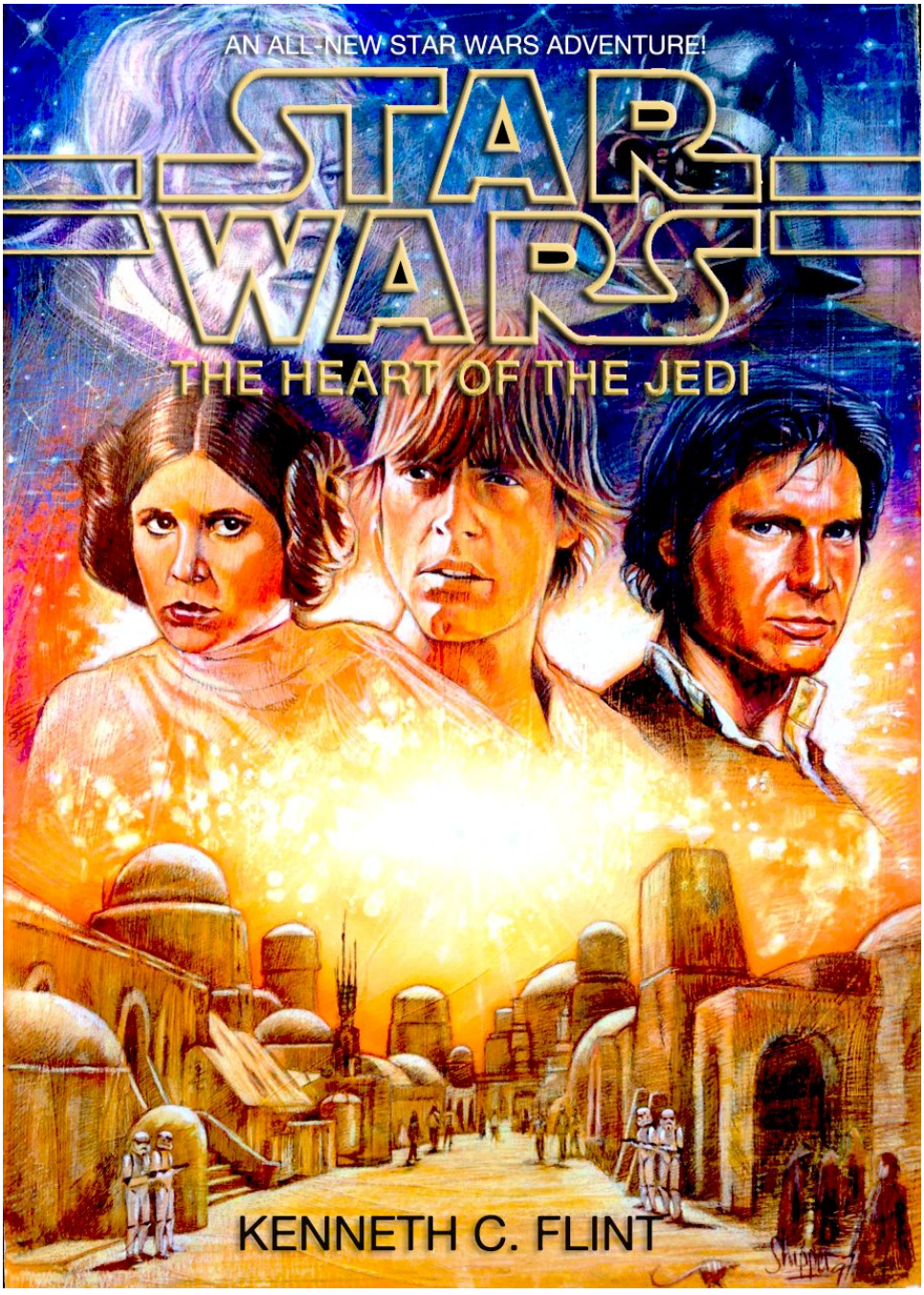
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STAR WARS

THE HEART OF THE JEDI

Kenneth C. Flint

Gallina Books

STAR WARS: THE HEART OF THE JEDI

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DEDICATION

This book is for my two sons, Devin Cormac Flint and Gavin Donal Flint.

Devin, now 15, was born the year the first *Star Wars* was released and has been a loyal fan ever since. I especially wish to acknowledge his invaluable contributions to the creation of this story. His ideas were most imaginative ones, and I know that someday he will become as fine a writer as he hopes to be.

Gavin's nine-year-old's imagination also knows no bounds in time and space. He has made his own excellent contributions to the writing of this book. He was also one of the best Indiana Joneses I've ever seen (hat, leather coat, whip and all) on Halloween.

Kenneth C. Flint, 1992

CHAPTER 1

The vast silence of that planetless sector of space was pierced through with the sizzling noise of laser fire as a huge craft glided suddenly into view.

It was a Victory-class Star Destroyer of the Empire, and it was engaged in a savage fight.

The powerful battleship was a massive, sharply angled wedge of metal. The keen spear-tip of its long prow thrust far into the empty dark ahead. The sides of its broadening hull bristled with rows of turbolaser batteries.

These were all firing frantically now, spewing out a blazing network of ruby colored bolts. But those bolts were not directed at some target ahead. They were all being fired toward the rear, and other bolts of a brilliant emerald hue were being returned, crisscrossing the Imperial fire.

And then the source of this other fire hove into view close astern. The Star Destroyer was not giving chase. It was being hotly pursued.

The pursuer was an MC80 *Liberty* type Mon Calamari Star Cruiser, another battleship, but one of pelagic design with a blistered oval hull.

Though an organic-looking and well-designed craft in contrast with the hard-edged bulk of the Imperial ship, it was still a fair opponent for the other man-of-war.

In fact, as the two dreadnoughts sailed on, locked in furious battle, it became quickly obvious that the Star Destroyer was vastly overmatched. The intersecting exchanges of broadsides that wove a brilliant latticework across the blackness caused many more blooming flashes of hits upon the Imperial than on its foe. And the pursuer was slowly but relentlessly closing in.

The frequency of its hits was soon creating a constant fireworks display across the Star Destroyer's sides and rear. They were inflicting much damage, destroying systems and power supplies, their accumulated effect crippling the Imperial ship.

A particularly well-aimed bolt from the hunter's forward battery struck home squarely on the rear of its prey's upthrusting command tower. A great flower of sparks erupted there as the strike's impact shook the whole superstructure. Within it, on the ship's main bridge, the dark-uniformed command crew was sent reeling.

Its captain, a lean and hawk-nosed man, grabbed the edge of a console barely in time to keep himself from falling. Face flushed as much by frustration as by rage, he turned to shout out at his crew:

"Where are those shields? Full power to the bridge shields!"

Another, younger officer stepped up to him. "Captain, they are overreaching us," he said in a voice that could not hide his alarm. "Their fire is breaking through. We cannot win."

The Captain turned to him in disbelief.

"You suggest we surrender, Commander?" he snarled out. "To that scum? You sound a coward, man. Back to your post! Keep all fire at maximum!"

The young officer, clearly stung by the rebuke, snapped a salute and wheeled away, but staggered as yet another, even more massive laser strike rocked the craft.

Outside, the entire stern of the great warship was engulfed in a spectacular blossom of flaming debris, spreading outward from the explosion of the ship's central engine cone. The intense fire of the attacker had found a vital point at last.

On the Imperial's bridge, a second junior officer checked the damage report on his view screens and looked to his captain in consternation.

"Captain, our main drive systems have failed!" he reported. "We're losing headway!"

The young commander consulted the indicators on his own console. A rearview monitor above him showed the pursuing ship, its size swelling very fast now as it moved in.

"They're closing, sir!" he all but shouted to the captain in his fear. "Grappling beams are locking on!"

The captain's face drew into grim but determined lines as he rapped out the ominous order: "Prepare to repel boarders!"

Through the stark, grey corridors of the Imperial ship the harsh sound of a klaxon blared. From everywhere at once swarms of armed men swiftly appeared, forming a swirling torrent of black-uniformed crewmen and white-armored stormtroopers, all rushing purposefully through the ship to their assigned positions.

While they moved to defensive spots within, without the attacking warship was drawing close. It slid up alongside the Star Destroyer which was now little more than drifting ahead in space. Soon it was running parallel, the side hulls of the two craft only a few hundred yards apart, their turbolaser batteries still exchanging pounding barrages of fire. The overwhelming majority of that fire, however, was coming from the attacker's side. By this time many of the Imperial guns had been blasted to silence. Their few answering bolts were all but ineffectual.

The hunter matched speeds with its prey, seeming for a moment to hang suspended, motionless beside the other ship. Then it began to slip sideways, closing the gap between.

Inside the Star Destroyer, the troopers and crewmen were reaching their positions. One company formed up in a corridor's end before a large outer bulkhead door. They moved into a defensive perimeter, creating a formidable barrier, the heavier armed stormtroopers at the front.

Not far beyond the wall they faced, the side of the attacker's ship was just drawing within a few score yards of theirs. As it did so, its turbolaser batteries fell abruptly silent.

At the same moment, several round hatches spaced along the sleek curve of the ship's hull slid open. From within, menacing looking appendages popped forth and grew rapidly outward, swelling into long, flexible conduits which stretched across like monstrous, groping tentacles to touch, then grab onto the Imperial ship's side.

As one of them made contact right atop an outer door, the troopers and crew now poised in defensive perimeter within it heard the loud "clang" of the conduit locking on. They all looked sharply toward the sound. Apprehension showed briefly in the faces of some of the crew. But all quickly steeled themselves and prepared for battle. Blasters were raised and held ready. The click of safeties being snapped off and the rising hum of weapons being loaded sounded loud in the narrow space.

For a dozen tense heartbeats the ready men stared expectantly at the bulkhead door.

Nothing happened.

But, in the next instant, the door was gone, blown inward by a compact but efficient explosion that rent it to flaring debris and sent smoke billowing forward, filling the corridor.

The Imperials winced back from the blast but stood stalwartly fast, peering through the pall of smoke into the new blackness behind the ragged opening.

Figures appeared there, only vague shadows at first. One moved forward. The first defenders, the stormtroopers, began to fire, their bolts angling into the roiling grey.

In response, an odd, angry buzzing sound suddenly arose. At the same time a short, green beam of light came into being, one figure sweeping it around within the smoke, swinging out to parry the blaster shots with astounding speed, sending them bouncing away.

The troopers stared, ceased firing, momentarily nonplussed.

In the brief lull the one figure acted, rushing forward from the smoke into full view. It was a man in jet-black uniform, a helmet with lowered blast-visor over his head.

He leaped swiftly and agilely into the first rank of the waiting troopers, The long blade of green light he held swung about from side-to-side with great swiftness and unerring aim, drawing glowing arcs in the hazy air, crackling with power as it struck opponents, slashing some foes down, throwing the rest into a panic.

Other helmeted figures clad in light blue began to pour through the breech behind the first, firing about with blasters at the rest of the now-disorganized defenders. A few stormtroopers tried to stand their ground but were shot down. The others turned and ran.

The boarding party clambered across the bodies of the slain and started in pursuit, the black-clad one at their head. As they began their push into the body of the ship, other doors in the outer bulwarks were being blown at several points, and other companies of soldiers were pouring in to engage the Imperial crew in vicious combat.

The separate parties of boarders blasted their way along the ship's corridors, smashing any resistance. Hundreds of Imperials were soon streaming through the ship in wild retreat, knocking down each other in the panic, trampling on helpless little cubes of service droids that squealed fearfully as they tried to scramble from the way.

At a central point where many corridors joined, several of the streams became a massive flood, pouring away to more remote, safer innards of the ship. From two of the corridors pursuing groups of the boarders appeared, driving the fleeing men ahead of them at a full charge, all but colliding together at the crossing point.

The black-clad leader with the blade of light gave a quick wave of greeting to the second group. Then he led their combined force on in the pursuit.

On the Imperial bridge, panic reigned. The young commander, now openly gripped by his fear, stepped up to his senior officer.

"Captain, they're routing our men." he said in a quavering voice. "They're moving through the ship with great speed. I suggest we…"

But before he could complete his suggestion, the shrill, sharp whistle of blaster fire sounded from beyond the main entrance to the bridge.

The two men jerked around to see a stormtrooper stumbling back through the doorway, chest smoking from a blaster strike. Other troopers and crewman began to pour through, shooting behind them, followed onto the bridge by the flicking tongues of returned blaster fire.

The Imperials had not even time to mount a new defense inside the door before the boarding warriors were shouldering their way

through the opening. Troopers and crewmen could only scramble for shelter behind equipment and control consoles.

Still, fired by final desperation, they mounted a spirited resistance from there. A wild and deadly melee erupted on the bridge as the attackers poured in, spreading out to engage. The trapped Imperials fought on doggedly, throwing up a blinding wall of fire. Great numbers of their blaster bolts struck home on the invading enemy.

Many combatants fell on both sides. Bodies scorched and limbs severed by the energy blasts were strewn thickly across the pebbled metal floor. Errant shots struck controls, equipment, monitors, and machines, raising explosions of sparks and fire.

Through the chaos moved the Imperial captain, evading blaster shots and falling men, crawling behind the shelter of his command console and crouching there. Beside him, the young commander crouched too, but rising at times to fire his hand blaster out at their enemies.

For a time there seemed to be stalemate.

Then the one in black wielding the blade of light moved out from the rest. He advanced into the center of the room with seeming recklessness, parrying blaster fire to strike out at the stubborn defenders with ruthless efficiency.

No defense could stop him. No shot could reach him. In a few bloody moments only a handful of Imperials was left.

The commander lifted up to try for a shot, but was hit by one of the attackers. He crumpled, dropping his blaster. His captain saw the weapon, seized it, and rose into view.

Halfway across the bridge deck from him stood the figure with the blade of light. Warrior and captain saw each other at the same time.

"Surrender!" the black-clad one called to him. The captain drew himself up proudly, defiantly.

"To you?" he spat back contemptuously. "Never!"

His hand swung the blaster up to point and he opened fire,

His hasty first shot went wide of the dark figure, but it did strike a blue-uniformed one moving up behind. The blast hit his chest square on, its force lifting the soldier and slamming him down.

Before the captain could fire again, the black-clad one hurled his glowing sabre forward.

It flew swiftly, with a rolling hum of sound as it spun end-over-end, flashing to its goal so fast that the captain hadn't even time to flinch.

It struck with a bright flare of power, the blade of light slashing down through the man from shoulder blade to heart. His smoking corpse toppled limply to the deck.

A great stillness fell suddenly upon the bridge.

The battle was ended, the last defenders down. The victors stood weltering amidst the awful wreckage of sprawled bodies and blasted controls.

The black-uniformed man strode forward, his boots on the metal deck clanking loud in the quiet. He bent down over the dead captain's body to take up the glowing weapon that lay beside it.

For a long moment the warrior stood motionless, the lethal blade of light in hand, looking much a figure of great and terrible power there, surrounded by the sparks and smoke and dead of that hellish room.

Then he turned, swinging around toward the group of his fellow warriors who stood watching him.

With a “snap” the blade of light went off, shrinking in an instant into its metal hilt. The hands of the warrior lifted toward his head. They grasped his helmet, lifting it free of the head that had been shielded beneath.

The features revealed were those of Luke Skywalker.

CHAPTER 2

-

Skywalker's face, though still youthful, seemed prematurely aged by the lines of frustration and regret which now etched it. He tossed the helmet down angrily and spoke to the others in a voice filled with sorrow:

"Why couldn't they just surrender?"

A small member of the blue-clad party which had accompanied him onto the battle bridge stepped toward him. Slinging its blaster rifle, it lifted hands to remove its own helmet, revealing the still girlish and deceptively innocent face of Princess Leia Organa. Free of the hampering cover, she spoke out to her brother.

"You know we had no choice, Luke," she told him in her steady, practical way. "It's just that more Imperials are trying to stand their ground. We gave them every chance. They just refused."

The figure behind her now removed its helmet too, exposing the rugged but good-natured face of Han Solo. He offered assurance in his own, breezy manner. "Hey, come on kid. We couldn't let 'em go! Their fleet's still disorganized. We can't waste a shot at getting every ship we can, even a slug like this one!"

About them, the other members of the boarding company were now doffing their own helmets and setting about starting clean-up operations on the bridge. Luke, looking around himself again, seemed unconvinced. He shook his head and sighed.

"I don't know, Han," he said in a weary tone. "It just seems like… like such a *waste*. I've even lost count of how many I've had to kill these past few days."

Leia walked to Luke's side. She lifted a hand to rest upon his arm and looked up searchingly into his face. A shadow of his own distress swept across his sister's features.

"I understand, Luke," she said soothingly. "I feel the pain in you. It's not so different from my own."

Solo stepped up behind her.

"Well, hell, nobody likes doing this," he offered in a bluff, defensive way, "I'm getting kind of sick of it myself. But, if you really want to get this over with..," he shrugged, "...what else can you do?"

The others on the bridge were by this time busily engaged in checking over bodies, collecting weapons, seeing to wounded, putting out fires, and accessing damage to the controls. One of them left the rest to approach Han.

"General Solo," he addressed the other smartly, "ship operations are now under our control."

Solo turned around to him.

"Think she'll fly, Captain?" he asked.

The man shrugged. "We'll have to get damage reports on the engines first."

"Well, get on it then," Solo ordered. "We can't hang around here forever. No telling what other Imperial stuff's cruising in this sector."

The man gave a salute and moved away, only to be replaced by another, towering figure who entered the bridge and strode toward the three.

The shaggy massive, shaggy being that approached was the Wookiee Chewbacca. His appearance there broke the silent bond of commiseration that had held between Luke and Leia. Both they and Han turned to greet their friend.

"Chewie!" said Han. "Got the rest of the ship secured okay?"

The Wookiee growled and grunted out a short speech. Han listened in some puzzlement, then translated:

"A message? Now? From base?"

Chewie growled out some more. Han listened again, then turned to Leia.

"Guess it's a Priority One call, Princess. For you."

Leia released Luke's arm. At this she was swiftly all brisk business again. "Can we take it here?"

"Yeah." Han called out to the other men, "Hey, where's the comm panel?"

One of the men gestured to a bank of controls. Han led the way there, carelessly hauled the body of a dead Imperial off the console, and punched a sequence of buttons on the board.

A screen above the console flickered to life. Han punched more buttons, and soon the image of a grey-bearded man wavered into clear view. His voice came to them as he apparently saw them too. He sounded relieved.

"Ah, Princess Leia. We've been trying to reach you for some while. We feared something had happened."

"We were in the midst of a battle, Commodore Nuran," she explained. "What is it?"

"No need for any battles now, Princess," the man said with some excitement. "There's been a cease fire!"

The three before the screen were clearly nonplussed by this. They exchanged wondering looks.

"What do you mean, Commodore?" Leia asked forcefully.

"I mean that since one hour ago we've had an unconditional cease fire. The Empire asked for it. We accepted. All fighting has stopped!"

As the full import of his words sank in, Luke's face took on a stricken expression.

"One hour ago!" he murmured.

Leia's own expression remained guarded at the news. Han looked mainly just surprised.

"The *Imperials* asked for it," he exclaimed. "Well, I'll be!"

"Mon Mothma urgently requests that you return to the new interim base immediately, Princess," Nuran went on. "Plans must be made quickly. You can get the details then." she responded briskly.

"I understand, Commodore. Tell her we're on our way."

He nodded and his image faded from the screen. Leia looked to Han.

"How long until we can be away?" she asked him.

"I don't know yet. They're checking on the engine damage. And I've gotta get a prize crew aboard."

"Well, if you can't do it quickly, I'm not sure we can take the time," she said. "It's more urgent I get back."

"It can't be so urgent that I leave a Star Destroyer for the Empire to salvage," he replied reasoningly.

"But, if there's going to be peace," she countered, "will it matter anymore?"

"You ain't any surer of that then I am, Sweetheart," he returned. "Besides, either way this thing's worth a big chunk of credits."

Leia sighed. "I'd hoped the mercenary was all gone from your soul."

"Once a scoundrel, always a scoundrel," he said, giving her a wink. He bowed and waved invitingly toward the doorway, "So, if you're in a hurry, come help me get things moving."

"All right," Leia acceded grudgingly.

The two started away toward the bridge door at a quick pace, Chewbacca fell in behind. As they walked, she continued in an authoritative tone.

"I'll go back to our ship to arrange for departure. You see to things here as fast as you can. Remember, we need to…"

Her voice faded as they passed off the bridge. So absorbed with their new concerns were they that none noticed Luke Skywalker had remained behind.

Still clearly much affected by the new revelation, the young man stood alone, looking about him once again at the many dead. In his expression showed an even more intense regret than before, a greater pain that cane from deep within, gripping and wringing him tight.

He shook his head and muttered in a voice filled with both sorrow and chagrin:

"Just one hour ago. One hour! *If we'd only known!*"

The monolithic, triangular slab of an Imperial Super Star Destroyer sailed in menacing grandeur above the glowing curve of the planet Scalar below.

On either side of it glided the forms of half a dozen Imperial-class Star Destroyers, seeming dwarfed now in comparison with the command ship.

From the opened bay in the belly of the big ship a tri-winged, Lambda class shuttlecraft suddenly dropped. Its side wings unfurled swiftly and it soared away, sweeping down in a lazy spiral toward the surface of the planet.

As it drew nearer the surface, piercing through grey-white layers of cloud, the outlines of a vast city laid out there came into

view. It was a modern but stark looking metropolis. One might have mistaken it for Coruscant, save that nearly all of the buildings were of utilitarian design with dark glass and dull metals. They were laid out with a severe symmetry, rippling out in precisely spaced concentric rings from a round hub.

As details of the place began to show more clearly, the nature of individual buildings could be discerned, most especially of the one structure that thrust up from the city's core and loomed over it in a most domineering way. This one was the joint Imperial High Command Headquarters for the Regional Sector known as Kasserine.

The building began as a thick, square pedestal tapering in stages as it towered skyward to over five hundred stories in height. Atop this pedestal, as if some monstrous metal blossom fixed on its rigid stem, perched a sharp-edged and massive pentagon. Its five flat sides were striped with the lights from two score more stories of windows, making the whole soaring building nearly a mile high.

The shuttle angled down and across the city toward it, overbearingly forcing a patrolling flight of smaller TIE fighters to scatter like a ruptured flock of birds to avoid its path. It slowed and dropped in toward the huge structure's roof. Here, shielded turbolaser batteries on each of the five sides surrounded a central landing area.

There was a great deal of rather frenzied activity on and about the area at the moment. More shuttles, TIE fighters and other small craft were moving about so thickly as to appear to be near-hazards to each other. Some few of them were landing, but the vast majority were departing, and with what looked like a very good deal of haste.

The arriving shuttle from the command ship found its way skillfully down through this confusing swarm of craft. It hovered a

moment while its wings lifted to landing configuration, then settled softly to a light-ringed landing pad.

The stomach of the ship cracked open as its long loading ramp dropped to touch the roof. Down the slanting runway from inside immediately marched four white-armored stormtroopers, taking up positions at either side of the base, weapons held at present arms. Behind them, four other figures then started down.

Three were in the dark uniforms of the Imperial Command. Two young officers of a smug and thin-lipped look preceded a somewhat older man, clearly their superior.

He was a most imposing figure, tall and spare, long limbed and ramrod straight, head held proudly erect and commandingly poised. He moved down the ramp with the purposeful stride of one in full, unquestioned control.

In the rear walked a fourth figure that could most loosely be dubbed a man. This small and most curious-looking being was man-shaped generally, gawky and cadaverous of build, with skin drawn tight across a death's head face. He was quite hairless and had an eerie, blue-white translucence to his flesh, the veins beneath the surface showing as a purplish network, pulsing with the coursing of his blood.

Most of this somewhat repulsive form was visible as he wore only a turban-like headdress and baggy loincloth even in the chill, stiff breeze at that high altitude. This made quite conspicuous the hazy, softly glowing, violet mass of the heart throbbing deep within his breast.

As the four reached the ramp's base, the tall man pulled up, the others stopping behind him. He stood looking around him at the landing deck. His lean, strong featured face was drawn in a hard

frown of disapproval. The intense grey eyes set wide on either side of an emphatic hook of nose narrowed in displeasure as they took in the scene.

About him on the deck all was near chaos. Scores of people were scurrying around, hurriedly readying ships, carrying cargoes of supplies and equipment and even furniture to load. The majority were obviously abandoning the tower in some haste, and apparently taking anything movable along with them. Most were civilians, dressed in the plain and drab colored garb of Imperial bureaucrats.

A few wore the cloaks and colored sashes of politicos with some rank.

The tall officer's gaze fell upon a chubby and red-faced supervisor struggling to cope with a herd of anxious, booty-laden folk who crowded about him. The harried official had seemingly taken no note of the new arrivals.

Signaling the rest to follow, the officer strode across to him. He stood waiting to be noticed, but the busy supervisor ignored him. He cleared his throat for attention, but the other stayed preoccupied, giving out directions while checking a computerized manifesto in his hands.

The officer coughed again, more aggressively.

This time the rotund little man gave a great sigh of exasperation and looked around to him.

"Yes?" he said in a prim, most put out way, "and just what *you* want?"

"I am High Admiral Tharkus," the tall man said, as if that alone should certainly be enough.

It wasn't. "Tharkus?" the unimpressed supervisor said consulting his list. "I wasn't informed you'd be arriving now."

"You should have been," the High Admiral said curtly, looking the man up and down. "And who are you?"

"I'm Chief Dockmaster Ptomel," said the other with an air of much self-importance, "Now, I'm quite busy," he added dismissingly. "You must notice there's a great deal of confusion here. All the panic since the Emperor's death, and…"

Tharkus brusquely cut him off. "That will end right now, Dockmaster! You will see that no more craft depart this base without permission of the High Command."

The man gave a laugh at that. He waved about him at the colossal bedlam. "Can you see this? Do you really expect me to stop it?"

"I do," Tharkus said domineeringly. "It's my order."

Ptomel's red face grew redder, "And just who are you to give that order?" he said indignantly. "These are mostly civilian people here. Members of the Emperor's government, not of your military. And some of them with a bit of their own rank, as well. You have no authority over them. Especially now," he added contemptuously, "with the dismal showing you've made defending us."

From the hostile looks, agreeing nods and dark mutterings in those crowded around and watching this exchange, it was clear the rotund supervisor had their strong sympathy.

High Admiral Tharkus glanced around at them, then back to the little man.

"So you refuse to obey me?" he challenged forcefully.

"Yes, I do." Ptomel said, drawing up to the full of his height and meeting the still higher gaze defiantly.

In response, the High Admiral stepped back, gesturing at the strange, clear-skinned being as he moved behind him. "See to it," he snapped.

The being nodded. His violet heart pulsed brighter. His body was instantly enveloped in a sapphire glow as his preternatural metabolism swiftly absorbed vast quantities of ambient energy from the atmosphere, transforming it into matter. The cocoon of light obscuring his image as his figure swelled in moments to a giant size.

Just as instantly the light faded, revealing a monstrous, amphibious-like being where the man had been.

The green-skinned thing squatted on broad haunches, a flat and wide mouthed head with bulging eyes looming two stories above them on a thick, deeply puckered neck.

As the dockmaster stared in astonishment, the head shot forward, the neck stretching far out in rubbery ease. The mouth gaped open. The man screamed.

It was over in an eye blink.

The thing had seized and swallowed Ptomel in one gulp; the head had shrunk back onto the body. The only sign left of his chubby form was a round, still wiggling lump in the monster's neck. But another big swallow quickly pushed that down out of sight.

The crowd around stood flabbergasted, frozen in shock. Tharkus swept a frigid gaze around at them.

"No one refuses to obey me more than once," he slowly, pointedly told them.

Coolly, the High Admiral looked to his officers.

"Lieutenant Voss," he said to one, "you and the troopers stay here and see my order is obeyed." He nodded toward the creature. "Kastor will stay and help you as well."

At this the creature's slavering mouth stretched upward into a grotesque smile. The people around cringed back from it in horror.

Lieutenant Voss saluted in reply to his commander as Tharkus turned and started briskly away, accompanied by his other officer.

The two men made their way through the milling throng to a central roof structure festooned with surveillance dishes and communications masts. As they moved toward one of a row of doors set in its base, the portal hummed open, revealing a circular lift.

The men entered it. Its door slid closed, and lights above it flickered, signaling its descent. In moments its door was sliding open again, letting the two out into an interior corridor.

It was a square and plain walled hall, its grey sides broken only by regularly spaced doors. Here the furor on the roof was being repeated. More masses of people in mostly civilian dress swarmed everywhere, some looking in a great hurry, many looking very concerned.

The High Admiral and his man proceeded up the corridor, weaving through the others, dodging or stepping over a variety of just-as-bustling droids, Tharkus cast his keen gaze around him as he walked, taking it all in.

Through one open doorway he passed, he caught a glimpse of a busy scene within. The interior of what seemed an office had been torn apart. A small gaggle of frantic women and men were pouring endless masses of record disks into the voracious maw of a vaporizer, a thick square of machinery that gobbled eagerly, like some starved metal monster at its feeding time, and burped loudly as it disintegrated each mouthful.

Tharkus shook his head. “This will all have to be stopped at once!” he growled ominously.

“Yes, High Admiral,” his officer crisply agreed.

Down a side corridor to its dead-end they marched to reach a large double door. Tharkus beeped a code into a keyboard beside it and the doors swung inward. The two stepped through into a large room.

It was a wedge-shaped space, widening toward the far end where long windows looked out on one arc of the city below. Just before the windows sat a sharp-cornered trapezoid of a black metal desk, around which a half-dozen uniformed men stood or sat.

These men looked up with startled expressions as the Admiral came in. They were momentarily frozen in tableau, expressions somewhat guilty, even slightly fearful, as if they'd been discovered at something clandestine.

But as the Admiral moved forward, expressions of recognition and then relief replaced those of concern. One square and bull-necked man bellowed out in obvious delight: "High Admiral Tharkus! We didn't expect you until tomorrow!"

The Admiral strode toward them, the officer behind him closing the doors.

"I made all possible speed, General Kantos," Tharkus replied. "What is it that's happening here?"

Another, wasp-waisted officer spoke up at this:

"The alarm's been growing here since the destruction of the Death Star," he said in whining tones. "Once word spread that the Emperor must be dead, the bureaucracy began collapsing. And word of our fleet's routing by the rebels has added to the chaos."

The high-admiral reached the table. He looked around at them, face set in hard lines.

"That chaos ends now, Admiral Dakova. My own flotilla is in orbit above the capitol. As ranking officer, I am assuming command!"

"Of what?" Dakova said with despair. "The remains of our main fleet are scattered throughout three systems,"

"A temporary setback," Tharkus said confidently. "Our combined firepower is still many times that of their rag-tag forces. Once all our reserves are activated and we've regrouped, we'll be more than their match, I assure you. Our defeat of the rebels should come even more easily now that the Emperor's gone."

"What do you mean?" asked Kantos.

Tharkus looked searchingly around at them. "Be honest, gentlemen, you all know that the Emperor held the military back. His sole power lay in his use of the Force." Open contempt came into his voice as he went on. "He was no tactician. No leader. No fighting man at all! His self-serving strategies were more a hindrance than a help."

The officers exchanged nervous glances, but gave grudging nods. Tharkus leaned forward on the table and spoke with sharper, venom-tipped force, thrusting home his point:

"You also know well how he laughed at us, how he belittled our skills. He charged me with some secondary role and put his pet Darth Vader in supreme command. Well now the military will have its proper place. We will gain control and…"

"You will do *nothing* High Admiral!" a new voice announced suddenly from behind him.

CHAPTER 3

High Admiral Tharkus jerked around toward the voice. Three new men had come through the office doors.

At their head was an elderly man of frail bearing and silver hair. His age-creased face was fine featured, pale, patrician. His dress was simple--loose tunic and pants of white, belted by a wide sash of a deep purple hue. A plush and flowing cloak of the same color hung about his shoulders. The other two men, a bit younger in look, wore similar garb, but with blue sashes and cloaks.

The three faced those at the desk with a bold air. Tharkus returned their looks with one of indignation.

"Senator Valladian," the High Admiral said icily, "you presume to invade our private office unannounced?"

"I heard you had come," the elder man replied in a calm but firm tone that showed not the faintest tinge of intimidation. "I wanted things made clear to you at once. There will be no more fighting. We have asked for and been granted a cease fire."

"A ploy, surely," Tharkus said in a positive, dismissing way. "To give us time,"

"1 assure you, High Admiral, it is most definitely no ploy," Valladian answered earnestly. "The Force is with the rebellion. The Jedi have returned…"

"The Jedi?" Tharkus snorted derisively. "One boy!"

Valladian stepped forward. His manner was both feisty and remarkably strong for one of such frail look. He retorted uncompromisingly:

"That *one boy* has been sufficient to destroy the Emperor and Vader. And if we continue to resist, we will be destroyed as well. The Emperor swore that the Jedi Knights had been wiped from the galaxy, that their threat was forevermore swept away." He paused for the full

effect, then hammered on. “He was wrong! We have no other choice. We *will* make peace!”

Tharkus now stepped forward too, confronting Valladian at close range. He towered over the older man, speaking brusquely in outrage:

“You can’t mean it! It’s madness! I refuse…”

Still unintimidated, the senator raised a finger to point warningly into the other’s face,

“No! Listen to me, Tharkus,” he said in still calm but decidedly threatening tones. “The Emperor’s government no longer controls here. Neither do you. The Imperial Senate has regrouped on its own to take back leadership.” He cast his gaze meaningfully around at the other officers. “And it is the order of that Senate which you will all follow now. No one else’s!”

With this, Valladian wheeled in a dramatic swirl of cloak and strode out with his fellows, leaving the officers to stare after him.

Most looked dumbfounded, but Tharkus’ features showed him to be seething, face drawn tight in rage, eyes glaring after the senator with a bright flare of hate.

“Admit defeat?” the High Admiral said through gritted teeth, “The greatest military power in the galaxy? Let ourselves be humiliated by a dissident rabble of dreamers, misfits, and malcontents?”

He swung around to the others, stepping back to the desk to confront them fiercely.

“No!” he cried, a fist slamming to the desk top. “We cannot let that happen!”

"But, to act now would make *us* rebels too," an anxious Dakova complained. "The reappearance of the Jedi has awed and frightened most in the system. They support the Senate's call for a swift peace."

"He's right," Kantos admitted, but more reluctantly. "Few would support us. And to challenge the Senate would only tear the splintering Empire further apart."

Tharkus looked around at the cowed men in disbelief at what he heard. "We are officers of the Imperial High Command!" he told them with great pride. "We cannot just give up to terrorists! We *will* not!"

He leaned forward on the desk to fix a savage gaze on them, adding with a chilling certainty:

"Somehow we will destroy this traitorous quest for peace with the Rebellion!"

A flight of stiletto-nosed X-wing fighters slashed down through the clear atmosphere of the blue-grey planet, heading for its rugged surface.

It was the mountain planet of Torbraleen, and the ships leveled at good altitude to safely whip across its sterile, rocky terrain of deep valleys and high, snow-capped peaks. With the Empire in decline and their problems with the Ssi-Ruuk, Nagai and Tof behind them, both the Alliance High Command and the Fleet knew it was time to settle and commence the difficult challenge involved in governing. As they had brought enough trouble to Endor and weren't yet ready to tackle Coruscant, the planet Torbraleen in the Outer Rim was deemed suitable for the time.

As they swept in closer to one tight cluster of peaks, it could be seen that the seemingly empty tips of some actually held camouflaged

ion cannon emplacements. The big globular turrets with their upthrusting muzzles were set deep into the rock for protection.

The ships slowed, gliding down past another peak where both electronic and human lookouts kept a watch, and headed for what appeared at a distance to be only a ragged fissure in the cliff face below.

The X-wings slowed further as they neared it. The crack could now be recognized as the camouflaged entrance to a hanger bay. The ships glided through it and into the lit space that opened impressively beyond.

It looked as if the entire top portion of the mountain was a hollow one, forming a single vast chamber. Its sides of smooth stone, tapering up neatly toward a dome, gave evidence of its mechanical construction.

An artificial sun glowing warmly in the dome shed a clear light on the open floor of this hidden landing bay.

It was thickly scattered with various types of ships, mostly small, mostly bristling with armaments. Hundreds of living beings and droids of widely varying types moved busily about, servicing the fleet.

The X-wings slipped in above them, hovered, and, at the direction of men waving directional lights, dropped smoothly into a cleared space in the bay.

As ground crews swarmed in around them, another, smaller group of beings came into view beyond, weaving its way across the crowded, bustling floor.

Princess Leia Organa led the group, in company with a grey-bearded man in baggy brown uniform. Behind them Luke Skywalker

and Han Solo walked together while the Wookiee Chewbacca brought up the rear alone.

Leia and the bearded man were locked in conversation. She, clearly the eager focus of the man's whole attention, listened as he continued:

"...and we're all most happy to see you here, Princess."

They looked around to see a young man in the orange flight suit of a fighter pilot jumping down from the ladder of one of the X-wings. He waved enthusiastically and rushed toward them.

As he reached the group, a beaming Luke cried "Wedge!" and moved to meet him.

The rest watched while Luke and the other man hugged warmly as old friends. The two pulled apart to grin at one another, the rare smile bringing much of the youth back into Luke's dour face.

"I'm sure glad to see you made it through, Wedge," he said earnestly.

"Always do," Wedge casually replied. "Good to see you in one piece too." He looked around at the others. "And the rest of you okay?"

"Not for any lack of trying by our Imperial pals," said Han.

They took up their walking again, Wedge falling in with them. He nodded agreement with Han's words.

"I know what you mean. We've had some hot times ourselves. A tough bunch those Imperials are, even in retreat. I can't say we weren't relieved by the cease fire."

"Do you think it's for real?" Luke asked,

Wedge shrugged. "Seems to be. My flight's just returned from a long recon sweep. There's no action we can see."

"I just can't believe it," Han said skeptically. "Those cold-blooded rodders? Just give in?"

"I have to admit, I feel some doubts myself," Wedge said soberly, then smiled again as another thought came to him. "But, hey, there're some others here who'll be happy to see you," He looked around him at the busy floor. "I'm a little surprised they haven't shown up by now, matter of fact. Should be close-by somewhere."

As if in response to him, a familiar and distinctly excited series of squeaks and whistles sounded from across the floor, growing rapidly louder.

At the sound Luke grinned once more, even more broadly. "I think I can guess who," he said.

All stopped again to look toward the approaching noise. The short, blue-and-white, barrel-shaped form of the droid R2-D2 rolled toward them through the clutter of the floor, followed closely by the gold, roughly human figure of its faithful counterpart, C-3P0.

"Artoo!" Luke greeted the now-gleefully beeping little droid, patting its domed top.

That rounded section pivoted back-and-forth like the head of a puppy beneath its master's hand, and the swivel lens of its camera eye switched happily.

Han stepped up to the man-like droid. "Hey, Goldenrod," he greeted heartily "how's it going?"

His friendly slap across Threepio's back had enough force to stagger the metal being.

With a whine of pneudraulic muscles the droid recovered, drew up stiffly, then replied in his precise, prissy way:

"Well enough, Master Solo… considering." He paused, and a tiny but definite tone of resentment appeared, adding an edge to the normally reserved voice. "Though, to be *quite* honest, Artoo and I have not enjoyed being abandoned here like cast-off scrap while you all

went off adventuring about the galaxy. This really is a most *dreary* place."

"Sorry, Professor," Han said sarcastically. "We didn't need your help chasing down Star Destroyers. Besides, we figured you'd rather be safe here."

"Actually, Artoo and I have gotten rather used to excitement over these past few years," the droid replied. "Furthermore, there is a great deal of hard work to do here. I don't mind it myself, but they keep trying to plug poor Artoo into all manner of machinery and ships." He leaned forward and added more confidentially, "And not all of it is quite, well, *nice*, if you get my meaning, Sir. One doesn't know where all it's been. It causes no end of bother." Threepio dropped a hand onto the little droid's head. "He's most adamant about staying loyal to you, Master Luke."

The bearded man with them shook his head in amazement.

"That's true enough," he said. "I've never seen any droid so loyal to one man. Almost like it was a living being."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Luke said sincerely.

He gave the cylindrical droid an affectionate hug, then looked around at the others.

"Just like old times, huh?" he said with a flash of his past boyish effervescence.

"Sure is," Han said, smiling.

Chewie growled his own agreement. But Leia stood, hands on hips, face registering only soberness.

"Look, could we have the reunions later?" she said with some impatience. "We're in a bit of a hurry now."

With that she turned and strode on without waiting, the guide falling in beside her. Behind her, Han exchanged a glance with Luke,

rolling his eyes up in a "*so, we're in that kind of mood, eh*?" expression. Luke shrugged in reply, and they all followed after her.

The enlarged little group moved on across the floor toward the far, sloping wall, where the lighted capsules of glass elevators slid in a system of tubes, carrying passengers downward to a series of chambers below.

The guide led them into one of the cars.

"Sub-level 23," he said into the voice-activated control, and swiftly they were dropping into the tube.

"...so, I believe this is the full situation as we have it to date," the voice continued.

The speaker was a striking woman of indeterminable age, slender, tall, of noble bearing and strong, handsome features. Her even, soft, but still commanding voice carried easily across the large circle of table to all those who sat about it.

"The messages have been encrypted with special seals which we've identified," she went on. "Voice and images have been verified as well. There is no doubt it is the Senator Taj Vallerian to whom we've spoken."

The table was a single mass of rock carved into a rough circle, the green-and-grey swirls of its marble-like surface polished to a soft sheen. A light from above was projecting a slowly turning holographic image of the senator's head just above the tabletop's center. Around it sat Princess Leia and her comrades, in addition to the older woman and a dozen men in uniform.

Leia now addressed the woman: "And you feel he's proven that they are in control, Mon Mothma?"

The woman nodded. "Vallerian has provided us with many assurances, as well as the confirmed statements of senators—almost all of those who survived the Senate's disbanding by the Emperor—representing nearly twelve thousand systems. They categorically support him and corroborate his claim."

The room in which this meeting was taking place was a smaller version of the hanger bay—a simple, smooth-walled cone cut from the living rock. A lens-studded globe suspended within its apex provided rays of illumination, and projected the holographic beam as well.

Leia closely studied the image floating within it. "Senator Vallerian," she said thoughtfully. "He was a good friend to the people of Alderaan. I knew him as a girl."

"Then, you must see why it is so vital that you go, Leia," Mon Mothma put in. "In addition to your own contacts with the Senate as Alderaan's ambassador, you are of the old royalty, the ruling classes of the Old Republic's time. No one is so fit to negotiate a peace with them."

At this, Han piped up with some force. "I just don't see how you can believe this kark! How can this… *senator* suddenly be calling the Empire's shots?"

At his abrupt outburst, the others looked in some surprise to him. Mon Mothma's gaze was somewhat disapproving, as if he were a rowdy pupil speaking out of turn.

"How much do you know of the galaxy's history?" she asked plainly, though Han thought he could detect a note of condescension.

"I know *enough*," he retorted defensively. "But I've been a little busy trying to stay alive to take lessons."

Leia swiftly moved in, speaking in more patient tones to him: "Han, what Chief of State Mothma means is that the Senate has been

the accepted form of government in the Old Republic for 25,000 years, and the Royal House of Alderaan has been a part of that since its inception."

"Yeah," Han accepted. "I know something about that. And when old Palpatine took power, he eventually shut down the Senate.

"Right," Leia agreed, "that body had long been a figurehead anyway, a semblance of democracy to help keep the local systems placated while he gradually replaced them with COMPNOR, the Moffs and the Imperial Ruling Council."

"I never understand why he didn't wipe the whole bunch out as soon as he declared himself Emperor," said Han. "He was sure ruthless enough."

"He was." This came from Mon Mothma. "Even so, he didn't dare, for all his power. It would only have confirmed what the Separatists had been saying and led to further secession. So the Senate, at least those members who didn't openly oppose him, were allowed to survive."

"And now they've re-formed," Leia said. "In the vacuum the Emperor's death has left, some have looked to them for leadership. And in the panic our new victories have brought, the senators have seized the chance to make overtures for peace."

Han shook his head, clearly not yet convinced. "After all this fighting, why should we should we trust them about this?"

"Because if it's true, it could save millions of lives," Leia replied. "Who knows how much longer this war might last otherwise?"

"We have them on the run," he said stubbornly.

"They can still reorganize," she argued back. "Join up with one or more of the Imperial Warlords like Harrsk or Zsinj, or worse, lend their ships to Pestage on Coruscant, Think, Han. Their resources are

vast. Only a quarter of their sectors are in our hands. A chance at peace is worth the risk."

"I agree," Mon Mothma said firmly. "Even a small opportunity must be investigated. But," she added more cautiously, "General Solo expresses a salient point: we must also be careful. Even if they are sincere, there will be those on both sides against such a peace. Negotiations must be handled under the greatest security. We are now seeking a neutral planet. Something safely placed."

"All right then," Han finally acceded. "But if the Princess is gonna go, then I'm going too."

"Why you?" asked Mothma.

"Somebody's gotta take her, don't they? There's no ship that's safer than the Millennium Falcon."

"*Safe*?" echoed Leia dubiously.

"Your ship sustained some damage in the Battle of Saijo, I understand."

"Nothing big," Han assured. "It's being seen to now." He leaned forward, "Look, Chief," he said confidently, "if you want your ambassador flown to this secret spot of yours without anyone knowing, then I'm your man. No one and nothing is as fast as me and Chewie."

"He's right there," Leia agreed, having to smile at the man's amiable cockiness. "Han and his ship would be our best way to go."

"Great," he said with satisfaction. "Chewie and I can be her escort, and 'course, Luke's gonna be with us."

Luke Skywalker had sat silently, listening musingly through all of this talk. Now he spoke up quietly but firmly:

"No, Han. I'm not."

CHAPTER 4

They all turned to Luke with looks of astonishment. “What do you mean?” a disconcerted Leia asked him. “Of course I want you with me.”

He shook his head. “You don’t need me. I’d just be in the way.”

“You wouldn’t!” she protested. “How can you say that?”

His reply was calmly reasoning. “Because it’s true. I’m no diplomat, Leia. That’s your skill. I’m still just a farm boy from a backward planet on the fringe of the Galaxy. I never got the education or experience you did. Just ran off with Ben Kenobi, and here I am.”

“But, you could still go,” Leia argued. “You could learn…”

Luke cut her off. “Sorry, Leia,” he said in a heavy way. “I’m really just not up to it right now. To tell the truth, I’m feeling kind of… tired.”

He got to his feet, his expression giving evidence of a great weariness, and of an odd forlornness too. Solo began to rise as well, holding out a hand.

“Luke...”

Leia held up her own hand in a restraining way. “No,” she said firmly. “Let him go, if it’s what he wants.”

Han settled back, though reluctantly. Luke gave his sister a small, grateful smile.

“Thanks. I figured you’d understand. I’m going now. May the Force be with you.” He looked around to the little droid. “Artoo, you come with me.”

The droid squeaked in answer and obediently rolled after him as he moved away toward the door. The others, still at a loss over his strange attitude, looked after him.

As the sliding door whooshed closed behind him, Han turned to Leia.

"How can you just let him go like that?" he demanded accusingly. "Something's wrong with the kid."

"What's wrong with my brother is his own affair," she replied quietly.

Han was plainly confounded by this seeming callousness on her part. "Yeah, but…" he began.

"General Solo," she said in a firm and formal way, "the peace of the Galaxy is our only concern now. If you mean to use the Falcon, shouldn't you be seeing that the ship is prepared?"

That threw Solo even more aback. He stared, then his face drew into a scowl at this somewhat curt dismissal.

"Oh, well, sure," he returned with sarcasm in his tones. "At your command, Your Majesty." He rose and gestured to his comrades. "C'mon, guys, let's us peasants go get our hands dirty…" he flashed her a resentful look, "and leave the rest to the nobility."

He stalked away, followed by his companions. Of their little band only Leia remained behind.

She watched him go out of the room with a look of annoyance. Mon Mothma leaned toward her and smiled.

"You have an interesting bond with General Solo."

"I suppose," was Leia's exasperated reply. "It's just that Han can be so *difficult* at times."

"That woman can really be a pain!" Han Solo was meantime proclaiming just outside as he led his friends into an elevator.

The glass car began its ascent toward the hangar level.

C-3P0 spoke up defensively: "The Princess has a great many responsibilities, Master Solo. As a leading member of the Provisional Council for the transitioning Alliance of Free Planets to the burgeoning New Republic..."

Han wheeled on him. “If I want your opinion, Goldenrod, I’ll ask for it.”

“Of course, sir,” Threepio hastened to assure him in a contrite manner.

The elevator slowed to a halt at the hanger floor. Its door hummed open.

“She does have a lot on her plate, Han,” put in Wedge as they stepped out. “And, with this new treaty with the former Imperial Senate, she’ll have even more to worry about.”

“Maybe,” Han said grudgingly. “Anyway, I’ve got worries of my own. So, where is she, Wedge?”

Wedge pointed off across the hangar floor. “That way. Repair bay three.”

Han headed off toward it at a quick pace, the others falling in around him. As they walked, he mused aloud, clearly still much irked:

“I’d just like to show Miss High-and-Mighty she’s not the only intellect around here. I’ve got some ideas too.”

Chewbacca responded to that, his grunts and growls undoubtedly a question.

“Like what?” Han translated with some indignation. “Like where they can hold this little meeting of theirs, for one. Might be I can teach Her Worship something there.”

“One might almost believe you two were in some type of competition, Sir,” Threepio ventured timidly.

“Her and me?” Solo gave a belittling hoot of laughter. “No contest at all. We’re real pals.”

They reached a wide, rectangular opening in the side wall of the main room and passed through it into the repair bay. This was a

smaller but still spacious area, lined with complex equipment, shelves of parts, and racks of tools.

Solo stopped abruptly as they came into it, the others pulling up behind. He stared ahead with a look of blended deep relief and great pleasure.

Before him, filling much of the bay, sat the familiar, horned-saucer shape of the Millennium Falcon, squatting on the three broad pads of its landing gear, boarding ramp down, while a swarm of men in overalls crawled into, under, and on top of her.

Brightly lit by the beams from banks of work lamps, the much-abused craft looked most uncharacteristically clean. The trails of rust and scorch marks from blaster hits had been scoured away, and her hull had a soft, smooth sheen from being newly buffed.

Most of the workmen seemed to be engrossed in final, minor, loose-ends operations, vacuuming the landing ramp, tightening bolts, polishing glass. Three of them worked on the forward top hull to fit a broad communications dish into position on its swivel mounting.

"There she is," Han said, drinking in the sight. Then, with great sincerity, he added, "I never saw *anything* look so good."

He walked forward slowly, the others following. They moved up under the curve of her lower hull to the front landing gear. Han ran a caressing hand down it, murmuring affectionately:

"How are you, girl? You know, there was a time I thought I'd never see you again."

"They've been working hard on her," supplied Wedge, "getting her back in shape."

"Uh huh," Han replied noncommittally, his eyes scanning her underbelly critically. "We'll see."

A man whose clean, crisply-pressed overalls said 'supervisor' came over to them. He was a dapper little fellow with neatly curled mustaches, and spoke in a clipped way:

"General Solo?"

Han turned to him. "That's right."

"I'm Higgins. Crew Chief here. We've had a time of it, getting this old girl back in shipshape, I can tell you."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. Hard to find a comm dish for a buggy so obsolete. Quite sure you wouldn't want to trade her in for something a bit more up-to-date?"

"Not a chance, Chief," Han assured. He patted the ship. "This lady's got a lot of good years left. When she goes to the scrap pile, it'll be with my carcass still at the controls."

The man shrugged, and cracked a little smile. "As you will, General. Well, she's nearly ready now. Refit and as near new as we can make her."

"I think I'll just see about that for myself," Han told him skeptically. He looked to the Wookiee. "Chewie? Let's check 'er out!"

The repair crew was gone. The Millennium Falcon sat unattended save for only two figures working on her top hull.

The immense, hairy form of Chewbacca knelt on the hull, a tool box open beside him. Below the Wookiee, Han Solo stood up to his waist in one of the engineering access cavities.

Both were more than a bit disheveled and soiled from a good period of hard work which was continuing diligently now. Chewbacca watched as Solo fiddled with some thick bundles of wires.

"They *seem* okay," he muttered. He called into a small, hand intercom. "Hey, Professer, you there?"

Inside the Falcon's cockpit, C-3P0 sat in the pilot's seat. He punched his intercom button, calling back: "Yes, Master Solo,"

"Check the motivator circuit on the H-K firing cells, will ya?" Han's voice commanded.

"Yes, sir."

The droid leaned forward and flipped a switch on the control panel back-and-forth several times.

"Turn this dial, toggle that circuit. Fetch this, Threepio. Fix that, Threepio. Shut up, Threepio," he groused to himself. "One would think that such a menial lot was all we were made for!"

On top of the ship, Solo was touching a circuit, tester to the leads, noting its needle jump.

"That seems okay too," he remarked, "But I better check on that transducer coupling again."

He got down on his knees and crawled in under the overhanging lip of the hull.

"Hummmmm," he said appraisingly. "A little loose. Chewie, hand me that number five hydrospanner, okay?"

The Wookiee shuffled through the box, took out the wrench-like tool and handed it down. Solo's hand came into view as he took it and carried it from sight. The staccato clicks of ratcheting began.

While it went on, the waiting Chewie lifted his head and gazed around him idly. But his gaze was caught, and he stared fixedly.

Through the door of the bay and out across the main hangar floor he'd sighted a small figure in an orange suit making its way through the bustling throng.

Chewie gazed more intently, sharp eyes focusing. There was no doubt. The figure was that of Luke Skywalker, clad in a flightsuit. And the unmistakable barrel form of R2-D2 was closely trailing him.

Still watching, Chewie growled out a terse statement. The still-laboring Han's reply from the hole was brusque:

"You see Luke? Yeah? So what?"

Chewie growled again, with more urgency. This time it jerked Solo upright in his small space.

"Leaving? Ow!" he said as his skull sharply contacted the hull above,

He quickly crawled into the open and stood, rubbing the sore spot as he looked irritably around.

Chewie pointed a long arm. Han's gaze followed it and he stared. Across the hangar, Luke had now reached a parked X-wing and was looking it over while Artoo stood by.

"That's him, all right," an astonished Han proclaimed.

He clambered from the hole and handed his tool to the Wookiee. "Here Chewie. Keep at it. I'm gonna see what this is all about."

And with that he began to climb down from the Falcon's hull.

Across the hangar, meanwhile, Luke had finished his ship inspection and was now watching two men hook the suction-like lifter end of a Magna-crane line to the round top of Artoo's form.

With it firmly attached, word was given, and the crane began to lift. As the droid rose from the floor, Luke turned away and picked up a white flight helmet. He was inspecting its inside when Han reached him.

"Hey, kid," the older man called. "What's going on?"

Luke looked up to see him. He smiled, but in a distant, distracted way.

"Oh, hi, Han," he answered vaguely. "Things seem so quiet now—the war on hold and everything, I just felt restless. Got to get away somewhere."

"Well, if you've got an itch to do something, you could still come with us," Han suggested.

Luke shook his head. "No. I think what I need is to be alone for a while."

Han eyed him searchingly for a moment, then moved closer.

"Look, this is ol' Han, remember? We've been through a lot together. I mean, I may not have the Force, but I can sure feel when there's something eatin' you. You can tell me," he added coaxingly.

Luke met his gaze squarely, face tightening into hard lines.

"Maybe that's it, Han," he said with force. "I'm not a kid anymore." A rueful note came into his voice. "I lost that part of me a few years ago, when I left home on Tatooine. Lost it pretty fast, too, as I recall."

"Hey, we've all lost a lot in this—me, Chewie, Leia." Han said reasoningly. "That's the way war is."

"It's not the same," Luke returned. "You'd all been out there, a part of it before. You were all tough. Even Leia. I never had any of that on Tatooine. I was just a dumb kid." He considered. "In a lot of ways, I suppose that I still am. Except with this… power in me that I don't fully understand." He shook his head violently as if he would like to cast it out, then declared with some despair, "I've just gotta get away."

"You can't run from it Luke," Han said firmly.

"I'm not running," Luke told him. "I'm trying to… *find* something. Some answers, maybe." He looked to Han with urgent appeal. "Can you understand that?"

Solo considered his friend with unusual gravity for a long moment. Then he nodded.

"Okay, ki… Luke. I guess I can understand. We all get to having doubts about who we are sometimes. I just didn't like seein' you go off alone this way. I was…" he hesitated over the difficult admission, "…oh, hell, I was worried about you!"

Luke smiled and put a hand on Solo's shoulder.

"Thanks for that," he said warmly. "But I'll be okay, Han. Really. I just need a little time to sort things out. That's all."

A ground crewman came up to them.

"We've got your droid all loaded, Commander Skywalker," he announced.

Luke looked away from Solo and nodded acknowledgement to the man. "Thanks."

He slipped on his helmet, then clasped hands with his old friend.

"I'll see you soon," Luke assured. "I promise."

"May the Force be with you," Han replied with feeling.

Luke turned away and moved to the ladder of his ship. While he began to climb, Han backed away out of the landing circle and stood watching the younger man until he had settled into the cockpit.

Despite Luke's assurance, Han's face showed his misgivings as he watched the canopy come down and the X-wing begin to lift from the floor on its repulsorlift drive.

The ship was sliding away before the directing lights of a deck signalman when Han became aware of another figure beside him.

He looked around to see that it was Leia, also staring intently after the departing ship.

"Luke's taking off for *somewhere*," he supplied.

"I know," she replied.

She looked to him, her eyes taking in his troubled expression.

"There was nothing you could do," she soothingly explained. "I can feel the turmoil in him. It's been growing for some time. He's got to resolve it himself, Han. You can't help him with it. Only he can find the way."

His probing gaze met hers. His voice was grim. "What if that way leads to the Dark Side?"

To this she gave no answer. But as her gaze shifted back to the X-wing just slipping out the main hangar door, a glint of mixed hope and worry shone in her eyes.

Outside the door, the X-wing was already activating its main engines and streaking away.

It angled up and across the rocky landscape as it accelerated, in seconds shooting from the hazy envelope of atmosphere and entering the black-crystal clarity of space.

As the ship rapidly pierced deeper into the star swept dark, the young man in its cockpit checked his instruments. From its own cozy port behind the cockpit, the little droid peeped and whistled to him.

Its sounds showed up as readable symbols scrolling across a cockpit screen. Luke read them and answered.

"You want a destination, Artoo?" He considered. Then he spoke the single word: "Home!"

The ship banked and blasted away into space, leaving the grey-white marble of the planet behind.

But, as it did, a second X-wing came suddenly into view, slicing up out of the planet's atmosphere.

Within its cockpit sat another pilot in an orange flight suit, but wearing a metallic blue helmet instead. He consulted his laser tracking scope, noting the blip of the other fighter ahead. The pilot nodded with satisfaction and nudged his thruster controls full on.

The X-wing flashed forward, banking to take up position dead in the other fighter's wake, but at a very safe distance behind.

CHAPTER 5

The X-wing fighter sailed from black space into the bright glow of a new world's atmosphere.

This one was Tatooine, Luke Skywalker's first home. A burnished copper sphere of a planet, it was blemished here-and-there by the swirls of immense wind storms, surrounded by a ruddy aura of high-blown dust.

The fighter sliced down through the obscuring atmosphere to come into clear sight of the surface below. It was a desolate vista, largely flat, desert landscape marked by occasional ridges of stone-like bony spines thrusting out through long mummified flesh.

The X-wing soared across it for some time, staying low over the ground. Then it banked sharply, swinging around and slowing to a cruising speed.

Luke lifted his visor and craned his head to look out through the canopy and down. Below him was visible a seeming habitation. Several circular forms, their structure and symmetry bearing evidence of artificial construction, huddled together not far from a flat ridge where lines of spire-like moisture vaporators showed.

"That's it," Luke said. "That's our moisture farm. Let's take her in, Artoo."

He brought the ship around and they passed over again, very low, buzzing the place. It was clear from this height that many of the vaporator devices meant to collect the farm's water crop were damaged or half buried in dust, losing their struggle with the harsh environment for want of care. There were no signs of living beings or functioning machines anywhere.

The ship slowed more to glide in over an open area close to the structures. It hovered while its landing gear locked down and then

sank gently to rest amidst a brown dust-cloud blown up by the repulsorlift's blast.

Before the dust had settled or the engine noise faded away, the canopy was cracked and swung open. Luke was quickly out of the cockpit, pulling off his helmet and tossing it back inside.

He climbed back onto the wing to help R2-D2 unplug from its control socket and then lowered the little droid to the ground. He jumped down after it and stood pivoting slowly as he cast a surveying gaze around him.

A wistfulness filled his expression as he looked again on what had been his childhood home.

There wasn't much to see. The farm's yard and few buildings were surrounded by rough desert striped with rock ridges, sparsely dotted with scruffy brush. The open flatness was broken only by the minaret-like spires of more moisture vaporators thrusting up around the horizon at irregular intervals.

Not far ahead of him, the grey stuccoed dome of the garage was the building rising highest from the ground, and this was not more than ten feet. To the left and some yards behind it showed the broader, flatter roof of the much larger underground barn, one side rent open by an explosion whose force had left the hole's edges blackened and curled back. And to the right, some three dozen yards away, was the wide, round pit that marked the atrium of the subterranean house.

Behind Luke, R2-D2 beeped to him questioningly.

"Remember it?" Luke replied to the droid, "Of course you do, Artoo. We met here. It's where it all started. At least, for me."

He gazed around again. An image of memory came to him of a vast sand crawler with tiny Jawas swarming about it, trotting out

their wares of scavenged druids. He saw himself and a stern Uncle Owen choosing out a battered Threepio and filthy Artoo from the lot.

Just more hands for the farm, they had thought then. Yes, that's when it had begun.

His gaze fixed on the entrance to the white dome, where stairs went down through a cave-like portal into the garage below. As he stared, another image was superimposed on this, of two scorched and contorted skeletons sprawled there, still smoking from the energy blasts which had consumed their living flesh. Blasts from the weapons of the Empire.

His face drew taut in anguish at the remembered sight of his murdered uncle and aunt. If the droids' arrival had begun things for him, this more horrible event set his future course, driving him to join Obi Wan. For revenge?

He gave his head a shake as if to clear it of the memory, then glanced around to Artoo, now out on the fighter's wing.

"I'm going in through the garage to look around," he said. "Why don't you wait here."

The droid squeaked an acknowledgement. Luke moved away from the ship to the stairway. It was half-choked with drifting sand, and he waded down slowly, hesitating before passing through the door.

It was quite gloomy beyond, the lighting systems and electronic apparatus without power. Still, enough light filtered down from outside to show that the work area had been brutally vandalized.

The apparatus controls and indicators lining the walls had been thoroughly blasted away. Machinery and an angular tractor had been all but blown apart, their scorched pieces scattered about along with the garage tools. Walls and ceiling were blackened by the fire

which had burned there, and the air of the room was still thick with the acrid scent of smoke.

Luke was dismayed by the sight of this wanton devastation. With more urgency he moved through the room to another opening on its right side, and into an underground passage lit by slit skylights above. It led to the house proper, coming out into its kitchen.

Or, what had been its kitchen. That too he found to have been savagely vandalized.

This underground room, like the others, had whitewashed stucco walls. They were now sprayed and streaked with the molding remains of foods and liquids hurled against them. More food remains thickly coated the floor, along with the fragments of smashed plates, cookware, and appliances. The smell of decay hung thickly in the air.

Luke looked around him, his stomach churning with revulsion. He forced himself to move on. Through the kitchen he reached an eating space, its table upended, its chairs demolished. He paused to look upward there. On the arch of ceiling above, a gold and brown fresco of stylized creatures and geometric shapes had been defaced with an extra viciousness, smeared over and partially hacked away.

He felt an extra twinge of pain at the sight. The artwork had been a special favorite of Aunt Beru.

From this his eyes went to a wide doorway that opened to a large, bright space beyond. He walked through, coming out into the central atrium of the house.

This was a circular area some forty feet across and open to the sky. A sheer wall rising two dozen feet enclosed it and was pierced by the stone-framed, rough openings of several doors and one window.

Luke paused again here to look around him, now fully taken by his shock. For this place was also a shambles.

After he'd first left Tatooine, the property, along with numerous others southeast of the Jundland Wastes, had been seized by the Tagge Company, one of the largest megacorporations in the galaxy. After a failed operation on the planet, they abandoned it. When he'd last been here, around six months or so after the now-famous Battle of Yavin, Luke had given the homestead to a down-on-his-luck smuggler named Throgg. He had lost his own moisture farm years earlier to an Imperial Bureaucrat who seized it by "right" of eminent domain. Throgg eventually sold it to Jula Darklighter, the uncle of his friend Biggs. He stayed on a few seasons as a tenant before he too moved away. Presumably, Jula still owned the property, but it seemed the Lars Homestead was destined to be empty of all but ghosts.

More wreckage of all kinds was strewn across the open space. A wide streak of black soot ran upward from the opening to what had been a storage room, now gutted by fire. Two vaporator towers in the atrium's center had been mutilated, sides dented, pipes and wiring ripped away. The clumsy, fat box of an old-fashioned work droid sat upended, one side caved in, thick legs pointing to the sky.

Any doors which had closed openings to the underground rooms had all been smashed in. Furniture, decorations, appliances, fixtures and clothes had been dragged out and destroyed, apparently with great ardor and brutality.

This gave Luke pause. That kind of extra vandalism seemed uncharacteristic of the Empire, he thought, It seemed to him that beyond the Imperial troops systematic sabotage at the farm, someone more vindictive had worked off a good deal of rage here.

The end of a curved stick protruded from the torn cushion of a sofa. Luke went to it and pulled it out. He examined it curiously. It

had been a longer stick, but broken off, perhaps in the act of destruction. Its curved and bulbous handle was ornately decorated with intricate geometric designs made of inset, colored bits of enameling.

It confirmed his suspicion.

"Sand People!" he muttered angrily, hurling it away.

But with this realization, a new sense of self-concern came to. He gazed about himself again, keenly and warily, drawing his blaster pistol from its holster. If roving bands of the Tusken Raiders had been there, they might be still around.

He saw and heard nothing about him in the deserted ruins. Still, when he went on it was more cautiously.

He crossed the atrium to an opening on its far side. After peering through, he stepped in, gun at ready.

Beyond the door was a large, long room. Light through a high window helped illuminate it, revealing the tangled debris of what had been living room furniture. Bits of sofas, chairs, tables, and what had been an elegant rocking-chair could still be identified. But it could also be seen here that from the amount of wreckage left, not all could have been ravaged. Some things had vanished entirely.

These raiders had come to loot as well as destroy.

Luke moved on across this room, feet crunching through the layer of debris, reaching yet another, smaller doorway. Its door hung half-torn from its hinges and blocking the opening. He pushed it aside, hesitated a moment, and passed through.

This time the room was much smaller—a cubicle perhaps ten feet on a side. His own bedroom.

It was windowless and still white-walled, having escaped that much ravaging. But its sparse furniture--bed, dresser, end table, and

chair--had suffered the fate of the rest. Chair and table had been torn apart and the bed ripped open. Dresser drawers had been yanked out, their clothing torn and scattered around. All other items had been systematically savaged too, leaving only their bits, rags, and shards.

Luke lowered his gun and dropped down heavily on the edge of his gutted bed. He looked over this wreckage and sighed with deep regret. There seemed to be nothing of his past life here that had remained intact.

Something sticking out from under the bed caught his eye. He leaned down and picked it up. It had been a detailed model of a sleek, tri-winged space ship, its three long foils sweeping back gracefully. But the upper wing was broken now, canted sharply to one side. And the slender hull had been crushed, as beneath a foot, leaving a gaping hole.

As he held it, a montage of past images triggered by this toy streamed unbidden through his mind.

There went his childhood playing space wars in the atrium, rushing around with the ship, blasting imagined foes.

There went his youth learning to fly a real if tiny ship, bombarding imaginary brush and desert creatures with clods of dirt.

And there too went his long, long days of dreaming about adventures and glory soaring through the galaxy while he worked out his grueling real days on the barren, isolated farm.

He lifted the poor remains to swing back and forth in one hand, as if the boy still in him were flying that treasured focus of past dreams just once more, for old time's sake. Then, very gently, he set the model down on the ruined bed.

He stood, giving his room a final look, feeling a last, deep pang of mourning for what had once been here. Then the young warrior steeled himself and strode out.

Purposefully now he made his way back through to the atrium and another stairway. This one led him directly up and out of the house, back to the farm's yard.

He strode around the curve of the atrium pit to stop before a long, low pair of mounds. Each was marked by a rough lump of rock placed at its head.

Luke knelt at the foot of the mounds, looking at the rocks. Then he spoke aloud:

"Hello, Uncle Owen, Aunt Beru," he said. "It's me... Luke. I came back again."

He paused there, looking uncomfortable, obviously searching for words. At last he went on:

"I... I'm sorry I had to just bury you like this. There wasn't a lot of time then. I'm sorry I had to leave you too, but it there was so much I had to do. I guess I could say I was out saving the galaxy, if that was important to you. But maybe only the farm was. And maybe you were right. I can't even tell you that I got revenge on who did this to you. It was my father."

He paused once more, again considering.

"Well," he went on more resignedly, "that's done now. I only hope you can forgive me for running off on some damn-fool adventure and leaving you to die. You did raise me, both of you, the best you knew how. And for all our arguments back then, I did love you,"

He put a hand down to rest for a moment atop each mound. Then he arose and stood there for a while longer, head bowed over

them. He and the mounds formed a stark tableau in the midst of the barren landscape.

But soon a whistling and beeping roused the young man from his silent introspection. He lifted his head and turned to see R2-D2 rolling across the yard toward him from the ship.

"No, I didn't forget you, Artoo," he said. He listened to more squeaks. "Yes, I guess I'm almost finished here." He listened again. "Leaving Tatooine?" he interpreted.

"No, not quite yet." He looked out into the desert, adding more determinedly, "There's still one other place I have to go."

"Old Ben's place," said Luke sadly. "What a mess!"

He and the little droid stood together by their X-wing, now parked in a level spot before a lone hut.

The dwelling was of a style similar to the garage dome, but somewhat larger, and with a wavy roof produced by a series of barrel vaults. Much of its whole shape was obscured by a high mound of sand which had drifted against both it and the ragged outcrop of rock up to which it nestled.

Though also half-buried by blown sand, a scattering of broken household objects could still be detected before the dwelling.

"Looks like Sand People hit here too," Luke commented, eying the debris. He pulled his blaster and gestured to the droid. "Come on, Artoo. But be careful. They could still be around."

Giving a frightened little squeal, it followed him across the open area, both of them leaving deep tracks in the sand layer as they approached the hut. Luke paused once to more closely examine a wrecked chair and the area around it.

"That's pretty weathered," he declared, "and there are no tracks around it. This must have happened a while ago."

Still he proceeded with caution, leading the droid up to the single, open door. He pushed through a low drift of sand across its threshold into the hut, Artoo very close behind.

The interior was a single room, the vaults of its ceiling supported by square pillars. Here too all the contents seemed to have been painstakingly destroyed. Still Luke went through them carefully, seeking for anything that might have survived.

He found a small, golden, spice shaker that looked surprisingly intact. He set it down on the cylindrical pedestal of a one-time stone table whose round top now lay cracked on the floor beside it. He searched into every alcove and cranny in the room without more success, until his eye fell on a large, metal, bound-and-studded chest in a corner, its lid closed.

His eyes lit with recognition and he went to it.

"This is where Ben kept my father's lightsaber to give to me," he told the droid.

He raised the lid with a surge of expectation, as if some other treasure might yet be found within. He gazed inside.

The chest was empty.

He dropped the lid back and sat down atop it, looking around dejectedly at the room.

"Oh Artoo," he said with despair, "what am I even *doing* here? What'd I expect to find? There's nothing that's going to bring back the person I was. I lost that long ago too."

He looked around him hopelessly again, then lowered his gaze downward, calling out plaintively:

"Help me, Ben. Tell me what to do!"

Almost immediately, a shimmering column of light appeared behind him.

"Luke, I'm here," a voice from within it called back to him.

He stood and whirled toward it, staring as the shimmer resolved into a figure of the white-bearded Obi-Wan Kenobi, surrounded by a scintillating silver halo.

"Ben!" Luke greeted. "I'm glad you came."

The figure moved toward him, smiling in its benevolent, easy way. It spoke in a voice that was clear but much muted, as if blurred by some distance:

"Yes, I came. The pull of my old presence is still very strong about this place. And I felt the great anguish in your call. So, young Skywalker, why are you troubled?"

"How could I not be?" Luke echoed with a touch of irony in his tone. "You were here when I was torn from my life after my aunt and uncle were killed. And then I got caught up in conflicts I didn't really understand, handed a power that possessed me but that I couldn't really control. I nearly died a dozen times. I helped destroy thousands of others, millions maybe. I discovered a sister I never knew I had."

"And you're wondering now if you've made the right choice," Obi-Wan said philosophically. "I understand your feelings. But, believe me, it was all for the best."

"Was it?" Luke fired back, astonished by the unruffled spirit's seemingly flippant answer. "Ben, it's ultimately my fault that my father's dead!"

"What happened to Anakin was of his own making, not yours... and you pulled him from the Dark Side, Luke. You saved him!"

"I see that, Ben, but what have *I* become? A killer for the Alliance, just like my father was for the Empire?"

"Of course you aren't," Kenobi reasoned. "You're nothing like what Anakin became. He surrendered himself to the mastery of evil."

"You and Master Yoda taught me that a Jedi's powers were defensive only, to be used in the service of good. But what have I done with the Force except destroy?" His tones grew more emotionally charged as he continued, the years of suppressed feelings, once released, like a torrent welling from deep inside. "Ben, when I started, I felt a nobility, an honor in becoming a Jedi Knight. I was eager to go on your *idealistic crusade*. The feelings were strong then, but... they've slipped away. Now, with the wars ending, I feel even more lost. I'm not sure what I am, what I'm meant to do. Yoda said I should pass on what I've learned, but I'm afraid to." He fixed a most searching, most desperate gaze on Kenobi. "I feel the power of the Dark Side drawing near."

Obi-Wan had listened to the emotional outpouring with an expression of understanding. He responded soothingly:

"Luke, Luke, don't get caught up in despair. It only gives the Dark Side greater leverage. Your confused feelings are only natural in a new Jedi, especially one who has been so haphazardly initiated as you. And I *can* help you."

"You can?" said Luke with new hope in his voice.

Obi-Wan nodded. "All Jedi encounter... *questions*... from time-to-time. All experience pangs of doubt or periods of weakness. And all suffer exhaustion in their constant endeavors to serve the Force. But the true Jedi's spirit can always be renewed."

"How?" Luke asked.

"You must seek a place known as the 'Heart of the Jedi.' It can be found in the temple on the planet Angorathea. It is strong with the Force. The threads of energy which interweave to bind all life together

have many crossings there. It is a collection point, its concentrated power form a sort of gateway into the pure essence of all being. There, you can truly become one with the Force. There, you can gain restoration, understand the truth, and find the peace you're looking for."

"Ok, how do I find this place?" Luke asked.

"It will not be easy," Obi-Wan cautioned. "The way is long and perilous. And you must make the pilgrimage alone. Understand clearly: only a true Jedi can achieve it. You will have to prove that the Force is truly with you. You will be tested both in mind and body before you reach the Heart."

"I'm ready Ben," Luke stoutly assured. "Just tell me."

"Very well. The key to finding Angorathea is inscribed within a milk-crystal bowl of mine kept here. Your quest begins there and now, and you will not see me anymore until it is done. So, I will say good-bye."

On the last words, his image began to dim.

"Crystal bowl? Here?" Luke said with a return of despair. He swept his gaze around at the wreckage, then back to the fading form. "Wait Ben! There's nothing like that here. The place has been looted. It must be gone!"

There was only a vague outline left of the figure.

From out of the last glow came a faint voice, saying simply:

"Then, finding it will be your first test in this, won't it? Trust in the Force, Luke. And, never doubt!"

With that, the glow was gone.

Luke stared at the point it had been, face drawn in frustration. Then a light of understanding dawned.

"The bowl," he said. "Sand People!"

He turned and rushed from the house, Artoo following.

Outside, he ran directly for his ship, the little droid rolling close behind. Neither one was aware of another presence there.

It was a figure in orange flight suit and blue helmet now peering stealthily out around a side of the hut to watch after them.

"'Heart of the Jedi'!" it murmured musingly to itself.

CHAPTER 6

"The *Heart of the Jedi*?" High-Admiral Tharkus repeated. "Are you certain of that?"

The replying voice came clearly through the comm link's speaker: "Certain, High-Admiral. I listened through a window. I heard everything perfectly."

Tharkus was in the office high in the Imperial headquarters tower. This time he was alone but for General Kantos. The two sat together at the big desk. A playing board with tapered figures of silver and gold that was set up between them went neglected now as they listened to the report.

"And you've no question that what you heard was true," Tharkus said.

"Absolutely it is," replied the voice. "And very important to him. He came straight here so swiftly I barely found a way to follow him."

Kantos leaned in, pressing the mute button on the communicator console. He addressed his superior confidentially: "Sir, can he be trusted?"

"I would and have bet my survival on it," Tharkus assured. "The Dioskouroi are my finest agents. Totally unstoppable."

"How can that be?" the general asked skeptically.

"They're a quite rare species who possess the ultimate in camouflage. Their molecular construction allows them to absorb vast amounts of energy from their surrounding atmosphere and transmute it to matter of any form. They are the ultimate impostors, taking on the guise of any being they wish."

"Shapeshifters!" Kantos exclaimed. "Like Clawdites?"

"But not limited to humanoid form; more like the Shi'ido, of which they are an exiled branch. Since we've known of their existence,

the Shi'ido have maintained neutrality in the affairs of the Republic and Empire; the Dioskouroi hold no such compunctions. That's why I set one of them to spying within the rebel base, hoping for some break. This might be it."

He punched the button again and spoke into the microphone, "Pollux, what is he doing now?"

"I don't know, Sir," said the voice. "Just hold a moment. I'll check."

On the planet Tatooine, the helmeted and orange-suited figure climbed from the cockpit of his X-wing and dropped to the ground.

The little ship sat in a small level patch atop a ridge. Rocky outcrops along the edge made the fighter invisible from below. The one called Pollux walked to the edge and climbed onto a boulder to peer cautiously down.

Just below, the hut of Ben Kenobi was half visible beneath its drift of sand. In the open area beyond could be seen the other X-wing, the tiny figures of Luke and Artoo moving about by it.

Pollux lifted the macrobinoculars hung about his neck and peered through them. Between the upper and lower readout bands was a clear, close image of man and droid.

Artoo stood by watching his master rummaging through a storage compartment in the ship's side. The area was small, the stored materials crammed in. Luke was struggling a bit to get something out.

At last he jerked a fat duffel bag free and tossed it on the ground. But clearly this wasn't his sole goal. He plunged back in, shoved things around some more, and finally pulled something else free.

It appeared to be most unremarkable—a board-like object some three inches thick, five feet long, rounded at one end and squared at

the other. But from the reaction of the Admiral's watching spy, it was something significant. Pollux immediately lowered his glasses and jumped from the rock, trotting back to his ship.

He clambered quickly up into the cockpit to resume his subspace radio link with Tharkus.

"High-Admiral," he said urgently, "it appears he's preparing to travel. He's just unpacked a hover-scooter from his ship."

"Not traveling by X-wing?" Tharkus said with some surprise. "Where's he going, then?"

"He needs a bowl that was stolen," Pollux explained. "He spoke of the Sand People. They're notorious raiders and thieves here. If they took the object, my guess is he's going after them."

"To retrieve a bowl?" said Tharkus. "Why?"

"It holds a clue to finding the planet, Sir."

"Ah," Tharkus said, understanding. "Well then, stay with him Pollux. Report on where he goes. If necessary, give him help, without his knowing it, of course. We must see that Skywalker reaches this Angorathea of his."

"Yes, High-Admiral," Pollux said briskly. "Transmission out."

As he was shutting off his radio link, his high-admiral was doing the same. Tharkus turned to look at Kantos, a gleam of satisfaction in his eye.

"This is certainly our chance, General," he said with force. "A chance to defeat the rebels after all!"

Kantos shook his head. "I don't follow, Sir. How can following Skywalker do that?"

"If what Pollux heard is true, this 'Heart of the Jedi' is a direct access to his power. It must be the way he taps into this 'Force' of his. If we could seize it for ourselves..." a note of longing came into his

voice, "why, we might even turn it to our use. Think, Kantos, what a weapon we'd have then. Nothing could stop us."

"But, what if we can't use it?" the other inquired.

"Then we destroy it!" Tharkus said ruthlessly. "And Skywalker as well. In one move we wipe out the Force's only champion and shut off its source. Either way, the Jedi threat will be truly erased. The Force will no longer aide the enemy side. And without that they'll be no match for us." He picked up one of the slender pieces, contemplating it gloatingly. "The game will be in our hands once more. With Skywalker out of the picture, our people will again be convinced that we can win. Support will come to us. And with our full strength rallied, we will strike!"

He slammed the piece back down on the board with a force that rattled its fellows.

"But, what about the Senate, Sir?" Kantos reminded. "Their peace initiative? They are preparing to leave for the rendezvous right now."

Tharkus considered this for a moment. "We can't let those misguided fools sell the Empire into bondage before our plan bears fruit. No," he said decisively. "That meeting must not take place."

"You would move against the senators?" an astonished Kantos asked.

Tharkus waved dismissingly. "Their act is traitorous. The worst kind of treachery. I've no compunctions about eliminating them if need be."

"That won't be so easy. The meeting place is a guarded secret, known only within their ranks. They don't trust the military at all."

"Never mind," said Tharkus. He gave a sinister little smile. "I've some ideas about that as well. Very soon, our senators will fall."

With that, he swept a hand through the midst of the pieces, cutting a wide swath across the board as they toppled to either side.

Luke Skywalker picked the brown leather utility belt up from the sand.

He checked the supply pouches, holstered blaster, and lightsaber hung from it to be certain all were in order. Then he buckled the belt on over the wrap tunic and trousers he now wore.

These simple garments of a lightweight, beige material had replaced his flight suit and uniform. They were much like the clothes he had worn there in his youth—standard garb on the primitive desert planet.

As he fastened the belt and settled it about his waist, he spoke in patient explanation to the little droid sitting close by.

"I *know* you want to come with me, Artoo, but there just isn't any way. The scooter's too small, and I can go faster alone. Besides, it's too dangerous in the desert for you. It's best that you stay here."

With the belt adjusted, the young man took up a long, hooded robe of dark and coarse woven material, slipping it on. Artoo beeped and whistled back to him in tones of clear dejection.

"Of course I still need you, Artoo," Luke answered it assuringly. "Just not this time."

With the baggy robe on and wrapped about him, the belt with its weapons was well hidden. He stepped away to the X-wing.

The hover-scooter's base was the round-ended flat piece he had fished from storage. It looked much like a speeder, but was too small for a cockpit, seats, or full controls. Instead, a simple handlebar affair stuck up on a curved rod from just behind the little bow, braking and

accelerator controls mounted at its grips. The whole apparatus floated in place some foot above ground.

Luke gave it a once-over, then stepped aboard, placing his feet in shallow depressions halfway back and gripping the handlebars. The scooter sank a bit as it took his weight, but swiftly recovered.

"Stay close to the ship, Artoo," Luke admonished. "But if there's a storm, get inside. You don't want sand in your works. I'll be back soon as I can."

On that promise he gave one grip a twist. With a soft hum of power the vehicle started forward, gliding across the sand. Luke gave the droid a backward wave and cranked the power higher, sending the scooter shooting away.

Behind him, Artoo looked after him with its single lens eye. A low sound came from it that sounded distinctly like a lost puppy's whine.

Above the droid, Pollux stared down at the scene through his glasses. He lowered them and scrambled to his feet as Luke flashed away at ever increasing speed across the open desert, shrinking swiftly to a dot.

He cast down the glasses and stood poised a moment, body drawing up stiffly and growing taut. Then a glow rose about him, an aura of blue-white light growing in an instant to a brilliant chrysalis.

It enveloped his body, swallowing all of its form but a vague shadow. That shadow seemed to vibrate, grow softer, turn fluid, and change. And even though much obscured by the glow, the alteration was a grotesque one as the human shape contorted and stretched, changing to something else angular and large.

It was a swift change, though, and in seconds the glow was fading, unveiling the transformed being that now stood there.

It appeared to be a flying scavenger of the Tatooine wastelands known as an Iktar. A large, scaly creature of pointed bill and peaked head, the diurnal counterpart of the sand bat, it stood on splayed, taloned feet. What seemed a shawl enwrapping it unfurled to reveal leathery wings as the being stretched them out to their full, wide spread.

The thing strode forward and boldly launched itself from a pinnacle of rock, sailing into space. The wings caught the air to glide it well free of the ridge. Then they began to flap, the being's powerful muscles pumping rhythmically to send it up higher, higher as it soared away.

It followed after the receding form of the young Jedi, the shadow of its ominous shape slithering across the rippling sands.

The baggage train snaked through the maze of ships and machines as it zipped across the hangar floor, heading for the Millennium Falcon's repair bay.

While a ground crew saw to the big hoses satisfying the ship's energy needs, Han Solo himself stood by the gangway, overseeing the loading of supplies needed to fuel the passengers.

One train of supplies was already parked there, men unloading cargo from the cars and carrying it up the ramp. Solo checked off the items on his computerized clipboard as they went by

He stopped one man going by with an unmarked crate. "Hold on. What's that?"

"Magnaethlyn energy bars," the man replied. "We got ten cases here."

"Energy bars?" Solo repeated, making a face of disgust. "They taste like tar-coated gravel. Haven't you got some fried pankott chips, or tannis rolls—you know, the cream-filled ones?"

"The Princess only ordered these," the man said. "She said they were the most healthy and nutritious."

"That figured," Han said glumly. He waved the man ahead. "Go on. Take 'em aboard." As the man went on, he muttered, "This is gonna be one long trip."

He looked around for the next man in the line, but his attention was drawn away by two others who had entered the bay and were approaching.

It was Princess Leia, accompanied by a man. They were walking close together, warmly engaged in conversation. She laughed aloud at some comment of his, her voice bright with sincere amusement.

As the pair reached Han, he gave the man a once-over. Even the untailored Alliance uniform couldn't disguise that Leia's new companion was a strappingly built fellow of slender waist and broad shoulder, topping Solo's height by half a head.

He was also somewhat younger in look and distinctly more handsome, cleanly featured, with a well-chiseled nose, bold thrust of deep-cleft chin, and wide forehead.

His thick, curling hair was a jet black hue, his wide-set eyes a clear, sky-blue. He moved with both a noble's grace and an athlete's unconscious litheness.

Solo finished his first assessment and looked to her.

"Well, Sweetheart," he drawled, "I was wondering when you'd get around to helping out."

Her lips pursed in disapproval at his use of the personal nickname when she was here in her official capacity and with a stranger. Her reply was pointedly impersonal:

"I'm afraid I have to leave the loading preparations to you, General Solo. I'm rather busy with other things now,"

"So I noticed," Solo looked the other man over again. "Who's this?"

"I am Gowan of Galvoni III," that one swiftly volunteered in a gracious way. He thrust out a hand to shake. "Most honored to meet you, General Solo. I've heard much of your brave exploits,"

"Uh... yeah, sure," Solo said, thrown somewhat off-guard by his amiable manner. He took the hand. "Glad to meet you."

"Gowan's father is King Caladane of his planet," Leia supplied.

"That right?" Han said to him. "I suppose that makes you a prince." He threw Leia a little, crooked smile. "Looks like I'm sorta surrounded."

"Oh, you know that's not important, Han," she told him lightly, "What *is* important is that Gowan's family was closely tied to the old Republic. His grandfather was Galvoni's senator. And he's been brought up with enormous skills and vast experience in diplomacy,"

The light of realization dawned in Solo's eyes. "You mean, *he's* going *with* us?"

"Why, of course," she replied, a little puzzled by his response. "You didn't think I'd be negotiating for the whole Alliance alone? Gowan is very respected, on both sides. He'll be a great asset."

"Please, Leia," the younger man said modestly, "you make too much of me. My talents are minor compared with your own."

"Gowan, you're only saying that to be courteous," she graciously returned. "What you've accomplished for the Alliance! Why,

just talking the Tunolans and the Phundahl into joining us was miraculous."

"Let's call it equal," he told her, giving her a broad, gleaming grin which he then turned on Solo, "You know, I look forward to having a most rewarding relationship with Leia," he announced, laying a hand upon her arm in an easy, familiar manner. "We have a most astonishingly similar background. I'm amazed we haven't met before." He looked back to her, adding earnestly, "Very disappointed too."

Han eyed the hand in a jaundiced way. He noted that Leia did nothing to move it off.

"Well, looks like you'll have time to catch up," he told them both dryly. "If you'll excuse me now…"

He began to turn away, but Leia stopped him.

"Wait. Where's Threepio? I wanted Gowan to meet him too."

"Gee, that's too bad," Solo returned off-handedly. "Chewie had to take the day transport over to Eskendren City to find a spare dispersal rotor. I sent Threepio along to pick up some other stuff. Liquor, mostly. You know they don't keep *any* of that here?"

"You mean, you sent a protocol droid out to do errands?" Gowan asked in astonishment.

Han shrugged. "Hey, a droid's a droid."

Leia stepped toward him, Gowan's hand falling away.

"Han, we are supposed to be leaving in twenty-four hours!" she pointed out in a low but firm tone, clearly a bit vexed. "I'm responsible for this mission, you know."

"Don't get your braids in a tangle, Your Highness," he advised calmly. "They'll be back in time." And as she opened her mouth to

retort, he raised a hand to stay her. “Sorry, no more time for a chat now. Got my fun little jobs to do. See ya, folks.”

With that he wheeled from them and strode away, not looking back.

“A *very* long trip!” he growled under his breath

The two looked after him, Leia with frustration, Gowan quizzically.

“Imagine sending a droid of that caliber on such a menial task,” he commented, shaking his head. He looked at her. “If you don’t mind my saying so, Leia, your friend has a rather crude way about him.”

“Han’s got some rough edges, all right,” she agreed with a certain regret. Then she turned to Gowan. “But never mind him,” she said more brightly, “I just hope that Threepio gets back soon so I can tell him he’s coming along as part of our negotiating team.”

“Fetching cheap Forgan ale for Master Solo,” C-3P0 grumbled as he walked along, nearly staggering beneath the burden of a large case. “How thoroughly degrading.”

He pushed his way ahead through the crowded streets of a warren-like city whose diverse jumble of structures spread about him. The erratic, narrow streets were half-clogged with market stalls where shouting vendors raised a cacophony of shrill sales pitches. The space between them was a vast milling throng of beings ranging from the very human to the extremely non-human, all rubbing elbows and other odd bits of anatomy as they forced their way along.

“I *mean,* this really is the depths for me,” the disgruntled droid went on. “A being of *my* great erudition, trained in etiquette, instructed in over six million forms of communication, here playing the slave for such an unappreciative human as he. Why, even that

great, hairy beast of a Wookiee has more exalted tasks than I. Well, just let me tell you, if I had my own way..."

He had no chance to finish.

From the shadows of an alley, black cloaked figures suddenly appeared. They grabbed the droid and roughly dragged him back. The dropped case of ale crashed to the ground.

"Oh dear, what's happening?" Threepio cried in a voice rising higher with growing alarm. "Who are you? Wait! This must be a mistake. You have the wrong droid! Please listen! No. No! NOOOOOO...!"

This last screamed word was cut off as he was shoved through a doorway. A metal portal swung closed behind him with a final-sounding "clang."

CHAPTER
7

The silhouetted figure of the Iktar swept across the fiery disk of the larger of Tatooine's two suns.

Its spread of shadow flashed over the form of Luke Skywalker far below, skimming the surface of the desert on his hover-scoot. He looked around and upward, noting the bird-like creature gliding high above and some way behind him. But his gaze did not hold on this seemingly innocent thing for long. It swiveled quickly back to the way ahead of him.

That was of obvious necessity. The vista of even-colored sand looked flat, but it was deceptively so. Low dunes swelled up often and unexpectedly. With the scooter moving at a high speed, it needed all of Luke's careful attention and lightning reflexes to swivel-hip his way through them.

He did this literally, using his body, the simple vehicle having no other steering gear. A lean left or right banked the floating platform, the subtlety of the move decreeing the acuteness of the turn.

More and yet more of what seemed endless desert scrolled toward and under him from the horizon as he zoomed ahead. That the search had been a long one was attested to by the fatigue showing in his face and the accumulated dust coating his clothes. Still he stared doggedly out across the monotonous landscape of brown sand wavy with rising heat.

Something off to the right of him caught his eye. He looked toward it, blinking against the light. He stared hard and blinked again.

Yes, something definitely showed there, like dusky ovals just visible against the lighter sand.

He leaned slightly right and brought the scooter around toward them. As he approached, he noted a higher curve of dune threw a

sheltering arm about one side of the odd spots. He altered course to make for this and put its cover between himself and them.

He slowed as he neared the dune, gliding to a full stop at its base. He scanned the scene around him. There was nothing but the arid waste.

Still he was wary as he dismounted from the scooter. He pulled the hood up over his head to increase his camouflage before climbing the sandy slope, moving slowly and keeping well crouched. He went completely prone as he neared the top, crawling the last yards to the crest on hands and knees.

He peered over the dune. Before him was spread a number of what seemed to be wide, circular holes clustered close around a central, much larger one.

His face lit with a smile of triumph. It was swiftly displaced by a grim look of determination. He scanned the area carefully again. Still there were no signs of life—no beings or machines, not a footprint or track, not even a smell or sound save those of baking sand and gusting breeze. He rolled on one side, reaching into his robe and drawing out his blaster.

But he paused there, contemplating the weapon thoughtfully. Shaking his head, he slipped it back away. Then he crawled forward.

Creeping stealthily, he made his way down the dune's other slope and onto the flat area. He went down again as he approached the rim of the nearest hole, sliding on his belly up to its edge.

Very, very cautiously indeed he poked his head over enough to see down. He looked into a sheer-sided pit over three dozen feet across. It was clearly an artificially formed hole, like that of his old home's atrium. It was just as clearly also a dwelling place.

Several openings to underground chambers were visible around the outsides of the pit. Some pieces of crude, chiseled-stone furniture were set here-and-there, along with some large pieces of pottery. They surrounded a central plot of darker soil where a garden of some straggling plants was being cultivated in neat rows.

Luke gazed down with open interest at all this, sticking his head farther out to see it better, seeming to forget his risky position here.

But a movement below recalled it to him, and he drew his head back just as a figure appeared from one of the openings.

He had a quick glimpse of something rather dumpy and shapeless, wrapped in flowing folds of material bright-dyed in purples, yellows and reds. Then he was edging slowly backward from the pit, preparing to crawl away to a safer position.

He stopped abruptly, a look of consternation on his face. His right hand had struck something.

His head jerked around. His gaze fell on the thing. It was the toe of a boot. His gaze shot from it up the length of a robed figure to the grotesque face looming above.

Luke got an instant's impression of round goggling eyes, protruding mouth, and trunk-like tubes running from nostrils to neck as his hand darted for his lightsaber.

But even his reflexes were not quick enough. Before he could grip it, the club end of a stick had swung down, striking his temple a glancing but hard blow.

The force knocked him sideways and he rolled over, landing hard, face slamming down into the sand, body going limp.

The robed figure stood over him a moment, as if in victory. Then it reversed its weapon. The stick's other end was fitted with a

long, slender blade of bright-honed metal. The being used a barb near the point to catch the edge of Luke's hood and draw it back, exposing the human face.

Then the blade dropped lower to press its keen tip deep into the bared nape of the defenseless Jedi's neck.

The human hand slid a slender, socket-like device down firmly over the length of the gold metal finger.

The hand of flesh pulled back then, its task complete. All the fingers of the metal one had been fitted with the sockets. From the outer ends of each, coiling wires ran upward.

C-3P0 could do very little about his hand being treated in this way. The golden droid was at the moment being even more than normally restrained. His body was immobilized by shackles about wrists, ankles, waist and neck. He was held rigidly upright, his back tight against an appropriately tombstone-shaped slab of grey metal atop a round platform.

The helpless being was virtually festooned with wires. Besides his other hand being outfitted like his first, there were wires running from odd boots upon his feet and from nodules atop a colander-like helmet contraption on his head.

All ran upward to form a thick bundle suspended from a boom whose arm hung close above.

The poor droid could move nothing but his head, and that only within a narrow range. Still, this was enough to give him a view of much of the room, and more than enough to confirm that it was a very bleak prospect he faced.

The place was apparently a deep basement of some kind, windowless and dank. Its rough stone walls shone with streaks of

moisture. A narrow stair angled upward to a single doorway high above.

It was a storage room, with crates and barrels of all types stacked everywhere—except in the middle of the floor. Here a round area had been cleared, and hastily too by the look of the goods that had been piled haphazardly about its periphery.

In this open circle sat the platform of the droid and, some twenty feet away, a chunky, complex, and rather malevolent-looking mass of machinery.

There were also a number of men in the room. All were Imperials. Two working about the machinery were in dark officer's uniforms. A dozen others were in the white armor of stormtroopers. They guarded the door and formed a wide ring about the cleared area, weapons at ready.

One of the two officers was just backing down from the low platform, having made the last attachment to the droid. He was Lieutenant Voss, one of the young aides to High-Admiral Tharkus.

Voss eyed his handiwork critically, gaze running up the wires, following them overhead and across to another support pole and then down to where they entered the machine.

This unpleasant pile was also a most impressive collection of ugly attachments and protrusions, uncountable switches and buttons, readout screens and monitors pouring out unknown data, flashing and flickering and stuttering and pulsing lights forming an unsettling display.

"Well, that's all hooked up properly then," Voss pronounced with great satisfaction. "Don't you think so, Doctor?"

The one addressed was an elderly, pudgy little man with a straggling grey goatee and wild, thinning hair. He worked over his

instruments in a most harried manner. At the other man's words he looked up distractedly.

"All? What?" He glanced briefly at the wires. "Yes, yes," he said brusquely. "Now let me finish my own work."

Voss glowered at him for this short-shrift, clearly not very much enamored of the man. The uncaring doctor busily adjusted more controls and punched more buttons. A faint hum of power arose from the machine, growing louder. The screens and displays began disgorging streams of figures with frenzied rapidity.

C-3P0 stared at all this quite fixedly. He spoke up now with a distinctly urgent tone:

"Excuse me, Sir?"

The younger officer looked around to him. "Yes?"

"I hate to be a nuisance, but I really must ask why you are doing this. It was my understanding that you and my masters were not to be enemies anymore. You are about to make peace."

"You are wrong, droid," Voss responded coldly, striding back to the platform. "Only some of us are. Or, are *planning* to. And that is exactly why you are here." He stepped onto the platform, thrusting his face up close to Threepio's. "We wish to learn only one thing from you" he said in a menacing way. "Where will the meeting be?"

"But, I assure you, I can't tell you that," the droid told him earnestly. "I don't know. An exact location hadn't been arranged yet when I left."

Voss cracked a smug little smile and stepped back. "Ah, that we were aware of," he casually informed the droid, "We believe you when you say you've no idea."

"You do?" Threepio said in puzzlement. "But then, why drag me down here? Why this?"

"Because you *will* know. And then you will tell us."

"I?" The droid was incredulous, "How?"

"Utilizing this transmitter," Voss lifted a closed hand and opened it, showing Threepio a small disk on his palm, "which we will implant in you. And, using a special code, you will send a message to us just as soon as the destination is learned."

"And just what makes you think I would cooperate in such a treacherous act?" the droid said indignantly, pulling himself defiantly up as much as his fetters would allow.

"Oh, you'll have no choice in that," the smirking Voss replied. He gestured back toward the pudgy man as he stepped down from the platform. "You see, our good Doctor here is well adept in A. I. T."

"Artificial Intelligence Transmogrification?" Threepio amplified, fear entering his voice.

"You begin to understand, droid. Good." Voss walked back to join the other man. "Yes, the doctor has devised a system that will most effectively reprogram you. You will serve our needs now."

"I will not," Threepio said stoutly, summoning his courage again.

"You *will*." This came from the doctor himself, who had paused in his work to join the discussion. "I have not had a failure yet," he said proudly.

"It will take more than some infernal mind-twisting device to make me betray my companions and cause," the droid told him.

"You hear that, Voss?" the doctor said with fascination. "His cause. And *his companions* yet! An amazing amount of human loyalty for a droid. Never have I seen such personality. It is a pity, in a way."

Threepio picked up on that "Pity? Why?"

"Because the process will override it in substituting ours. And, I'm afraid the alteration is quite irreversible. So, good-bye."

With that he flipped a final switch.

The humming of the machine increased to a roar. Power sizzled along the mass of wires and crackled from the scores of connecters to the droid. Silver tendrils of energy flickered over his metal skin. His eyes flared to the brightness of twin spotlights. His form shuddered with the immense force coursing through it.

The grey slab he was fastened against started to glow, changing swiftly to incandescent white as if from immense heat. The platform on which he stood began glowing too, and a curved wall of white light, like a translucent glass capsule, rose up from it to surround the vibrating form, hiding it from sight.

But out of that column of blinding luminescence there came a single, long, and rising cry of pain.

The light was an intense, red-gold blaze that seemed to consume all space.

Luke Skywalker opened his eyes and squintingly looked into it. Slowly his gaze focused. The glow resolved into the light of Tatooine's twin suns right above. He was flat on his back looking straight into the sky.

He stared up in a disoriented way for a moment. Then he turned his head to one side.

He found himself looking into the black eye sockets of a skull.

His eyes widened in shock. It was a semi-human skull that stared back at him, having pronounced brow ridges and small tusks. An enterprising desert spider had taken the rare bit of shelter for a nest, filling its gaping jaws with web.

Luke recovered and tried to rise. He found quickly that this was impossible. He struggled a bit harder but remained flat on his back. Lifting his head as high as he could, he strained to look around.

He was now stretched out spread-eagle on the sand, chained hand-and-foot to metal stakes. He had been stripped down to his trousers, the white flesh of his torso exposed to the merciless Tatooine suns. Exposed to something else, too. A curious, golden goo with a pungently sweet smell had been poured on his chest and was slowly oozing down his sides.

"Burraan Bush sap," he identified in a wondering voice already growing husky from a parching throat.

With an effort he lifted up higher for a broader view. He could see he was in a round, open area of hard-packed earth. It was quite flat except for slender, serpentine runs of dune crisscrossing in the sand sea that lay all about the small island of solid ground. And he wasn't alone there. Spread around him were the remains of many others who had clearly suffered the same fate which was now meant for him.

A score of endo and exoskeletons from various lifeforms were all staked out as he. Not rotted away as by weather and time. Not torn apart as by scavengers. Just stripped down to their bare, sun bleached, sand-blasted shells or bones.

From this cheerless prospect Luke turned his attention to his restraints. He yanked experimentally at the chains. They were of very strongly forged links. He examined the metal handcuffs. They were secured by cotter pins at his wrists beyond his fingers' reach.

He directed his strength to first pulling a leg stake and then an arm. His sinewy body grew taut with effort as he tried brute force. But the rods were too deep in the hard ground to be pulled out toward him,

and the yard-long length of chain gave him no leverage to pull them up. He abandoned this struggle as futile.

Of course his belt, including the lightsaber, was gone. He couldn't have reached the weapon with a hand, but he almost certainly could have with the Force.

The Force. He looked carefully about him once again, clearly contemplating where that power might best be put to use.

His gaze lit on one of the stakes above his head. He fixed his eyes on it, brow furrowing in concentration.

For long moments nothing happened. But Luke's focus didn't waver. And finally, only infinitesimally at first, the stake began to quiver.

He redoubled his effort, face drawing tighter, reaching toward the stake with outspread fingers as if beckoning it to him. It shook harder, loosening itself.

His whole body vibrated with the strain. Sped by the movement, a trail of the viscose gold sap ran on down his side. A fat drop of it formed and fell, plopping to the ground in a puff of dust.

Heedless of this, Luke strained on. The stake now began to edge upward. It moved only a millimeter at a time, but it was definitely lifting. It was coming out!

Another thick globule plashed onto the ground, its moisture absorbed instantly into the arid sand.

A small but peculiar noise broke Luke's concentration. He paused and listened. It was a faint drumming blended with a hissing sound.

He looked around to find its source, but it stopped.

His gaze searched the surroundings. There was nothing but him and his wasted comrades.

Then the sound came again, this time continuing. He located its direction and stared in growing wonder. In the surrounding sand a new line of dune was forming as he watched, and it was running straight toward him.

The movement stopped abruptly some dozen feet away, on the edge of the hard-surface area. The end of the low ridge throbbed, wriggled, and swelled larger. From the sand atop it, something popped into view.

It was two bulbous eyes.

CHAPTER 8

The eyes were armored with a coat of scales save at their gold, slit-irised pupils. They swiveled back, up, down, forward and around, turning nearly 360 degrees and quite independently.

With the area thoroughly scanned, they both switched back toward him. Luke met their gaze, his expression one of mixed curiosity and concern.

Apparently judging Luke safely helpless, the rest of the thing at last rose into view, like a sea creature surfacing from the waves. The sand poured away around it to leave the form of a scavenging Dune Maggot fully exposed.

It was a large creature, eighteen inches wide and two feet long. The compact body was squat and low to the ground. A broad back and tapered tail were covered with thick scales, while its domed head was a single, hard, smooth plate, all of brownish-grey. The two eyes protruded from the top of this dome, giving the thing a full range of vision. No other features—nose, mouth, ears, claws or legs—were visible.

Luke kept still, breath held, just watching, waiting to see what it would do. He hadn't long to wait. After eying him some seconds longer, it lifted slightly and something snaked out from beneath its front.

It was a long, red, segmented tendril, rather like a worm, save that it was lined with tiny barbs. It crept forward onto the hard ground as if an exploring creature of its own, pausing with tip raised and quivering, seeming to sniff the air.

It felt its way out across the entire open space from the armored creature to Luke, at last reaching the golden splats of the thick ooze dripped beside him. The tip sniffed around a spot of sap, then touched it lightly, in a licking way.

It lifted up, quivering more sharply, stretching out toward him and toward the pool of the liquid coagulating on his chest.

It shot suddenly forward, a length of it lashing across him, the tip diving into the sap. Luke winced with pain, throwing himself about as violently as he could to shake it off.

His effort worked. The tendril jerked in alarm and slid off. The barbs of it left a long, inflamed welt across his skin.

He watched the tongue draw back, like a line reeled in, to vanish beneath the creature. But the brief taste of the sweet gold liquid seemed to have been enough to bring it to action.

A rapid drumming sound came from it as it vibrated its tail against the sand. It was making a call, and the call was answered soon. In moments a dozen others like it surfaced from the sand all around the area.

With the rest of its clan gathered, the first creature made the initiating move. It lifted from the sand.

It exposed its means of propulsion: rows of tiny feet, like a millipedes. It also exposed its mouth.

It was at once obvious how the other hapless victims had been stripped. The creature had no jaws, just a round, soft, sucker mouth that pulsed open and closed like smacking lips, as if in anticipation of a new feast. And within that suction ring were lines of needle-sharp teeth, the throat's flexing muscles meshing and gnashing them constantly.

His flesh was destined to be suctioned from its bones and ground to pieces in this living food processor.

The other creatures stayed put atop their tunnel mounds. Only this one who seemed to be their scout began a slow, wary crawl forward from the safety of its sand ocean onto the hard ground.

Understanding his predicament, Luke wasted no more time. His only chance of escape was to free himself before these beings latched onto him. To do that he could pay no more heed to them or to his danger. All his will, all his attention had to be put to using the Force.

He turned away from the approaching maggot and looked back to the stake. His face squeezed tight with his concentration. Again, slowly, slowly, the stake began to rise.

For agonizing, long seconds it was a snail race between creature and stake. The animal covered half the distance to Luke on its churning little legs. The stake crept up three inches, six inches, a foot. But there seemed to be no end to the thing!

The creature paused, and its long tongue shot again from the pulsing mouth, this time swiftly snaking across to rise and slap across his chest,

Luke jerked at the stinging blow, but he held on, forcing his full attention to staying at his task, ignoring the swollen stripe left as the tongue drew back. But the Dune Maggot, emboldened by the man's lack of response, crawled ahead more swiftly.

The stake lifted another half-foot. Was it moving with a bit more speed now? Luke redoubled his effort, murmuring the words, "...never doubt...never doubt...never doubt..." as if they were a focusing mantra to further channel his output.

The creature scooted right up to his side. Its sucker lips stretched out to touch the liquid that had dripped next to him. Its tail thumped the ground energetically.

In response, the others began to crawl forward.

Luke kept up his effort. He couldn't let the increasing peril distract him. The stake was out of the ground a good two feet now, moving with a clearly greater ease.

The creature beside him lifted up its head section and fixed its suction mouth against Luke's side.

He gasped at the pain, but his control didn't waver. With a last surge of effort, he beckoned to the stake with a straining hand.

The metal rod lifted another foot and then jerked hard sideways, pulling its last twelve inches from the ground.

It shot across the sand to slap its middle into the palm of Skywalker's waiting hand.

Without hesitation, Luke lifted his freed arm, swept the rod around, and in one swift, powerful action slammed its pointed end down into the maggot's back.

The tip cracked through the scales just behind the armored head, the heavy stake plunging on through the body and driving deep into the sand.

Slimy, green-yellow blood bubbled and sprayed from the hole. The impaled creature thrashed madly, tail drumming a death tattoo on the sand. Its sucker mouth pulled free of him, working spasmodically in its final throes. The tongue lashed out at him, slapping across his arm, but this was a last act. Tongue and owner both went limp at once.

Luke yanked the stake out of the dead creature and looked around, holding the metal rod up defensively.

But the others had been frightened back by the killing of the first. They'd swiftly withdrawn to the edge of the sand. *Only* that far, however. They hadn't completely abandoned their dinner table.

Luke's battle wasn't over yet, and he still wasn't free.

Again he forced himself to ignore them and focus the Force on the other hand stake. His experience with the first had apparently honed his skill to do this special task, for the rod began to quiver and then to rise almost at once.

Just as well, too, for the death of the one creature hadn't intimidated the rest very much. In just a few moments they had all begun to crawl toward him again, tongues flicking out.

Luke's powers yanked the second stake free just as they closed. This time the pack of beings was not to be denied their meal. They attacked him all at once.

They darted in from every side with sudden bursts of speed, tongues lashing out to whip across him in an attempt to distract him as they angled for a chance to affix their mouths to his flesh.

Luke struck back furiously with a long stake in either hand. He used the two as swords to slash and thrust out at the swarming maggots as best he could while still chained down by the legs.

The battle was desperate, savage, but quite brief. In a few moments three more of the creatures lay thrashing in their death throes while the rest, some grievously wounded, beat a full retreat.

Luke watched, the stakes held ready, until the last one reached the sand and crawled painfully back into its mound, trailing a thick stream of its mucus-like blood from a gushing hole.

He took a deep breath of relief and exhaustion and lowered the makeshift weapons. He looked down at himself to assess damage. His bare torso and arms were laced with red welts from the Dune Maggots' lashing tongues, his whole body soaked in their sticky blood.

But he was free and he was still alive.

"Bless the Force" he said aloud to the sky. Then he set about the work of releasing himself from the cuffs of his chains.

High overhead, unnoticed, the form of a large, leathery-winged being cruised on in lazy circles while keeping its close watch over events below.

Two forms swaddled loosely in the bright bands of cloth worked to hang wet skeins of just-dyed fabric on a drying line.

Several lines were strung on poles across the floor of one of the open pits. The two beings stood with baskets beside them, lifting out the still-dripping material, draping it and carefully spreading it out. Three lines were already filled with the stuff, whose vivid purples, yellows, and reds suggested it would end up as more of the enwrapping cloth.

A few similar but smaller living forms, swathed like the others into shapeless bundles, crawled or chased around the workers, seemingly at play.

Luke Skywalker peeked down at them, then withdrew from the pit's edge. He crawled on, but paused again at the edge of the next opening. A very strong and very gamey odor was wafting up from this one. He paused to peer down into it too.

This pit was being used as a sort of corral. It held a number of the ponderous horned and wooly beasts called Banthas, which the Sand People used for transport. They stood about placidly or ate of dried scrub piled in a stone trough.

Luke went on, making his way between two more openings, boldly moving toward the largest excavation at the center of the rest.

Here he peered cautiously down again. This larger atrium was ringed by only four holes widely spaced. Instead of a central cultivated plot, there was a round stone platform. And that was surrounded by

several concentric rings of curved, stone benches. Clearly this Sand People structure was used as meeting place.

No figures moved in the area below. Luke raised his head and looked around him at the surface. There were also no signs of life there. He took a deep breath, drew up into a crouch, and hopped over the edge.

The athletic prowess of a Jedi carried him down to land lightly and roll immediately into the cover of a bench. He peered out from its shelter. There was still nothing. The black holes of the openings stayed empty.

Using the bench rings for cover, he crept up close to one doorway and looked through. The shadows beyond were deep in contrast with the bright outside. Nothing but some vague shapes was visible.

He sat still a moment, face drawn in consideration. His unarmed intrusion here was certainly a daring one. How far could he go?

The answer to that was given when he stood up and, with a look of grim resolution, moved to the door.

He peered around the side of the opening into the interior, saw nothing, and brashly stepped inside.

Almost immediately he was backing out again. As he came into the sunshine, the light glinted on the point of a spearhead pressed against his bare breastbone. This was followed by the length of a gaffi stick and then the one who held it.

That one was a most imposing figure indeed. The humanoid being was no doubt a warrior of the Sand People, clad in a typical brown burnoose. From a height of at least seven feet it stared down at him through the goggling eyepieces of its desert survival mask.

The being's mouth was covered by a filtration device with a front grill like three protruding tusks. Below this was suspended the vaporation canister of the simple breathing apparatus. A row of keen spikes thrust up from the brown, wrinkled rags swathing the large head. There seemed to be no protuberance for a nose, although the long, cone-shaped objects that stuck out from each cheek might have been meant for the nostrils.

The warrior backed Luke well out into the open with the threat of his weapon. The young Jedi tried a reasoning approach:

"Look, I'm not here to hurt you. Believe me, I'm no enemy. I only want to find something."

There was no response at all to this. The being stood like stone.

Luke tried again:

"Okay, I'm sorry I don't know your language. That doesn't mean we can't communicate. There must be some way."

This time there came from the tall figure a brief flurry of grunts and guttural sounds, wholly unintelligible.

"That's something anyway," the young Jedi said hopefully. "My name is Luke." He pointed to his chest. "Luke Skywalker." He pointed to the other, "And you?"

In response to this the figure lifted its head and gave forth a loud, low, trumpeting sound that echoed from the walls of the pit.

"Well, *that* wasn't what I was hoping for, Luke said. He looked around him with misgivings.

They were swiftly realized. At once figures appeared from the other doorways. A score of similarly armed and clad warriors swarmed quickly out to form around Skywalker, the outthrust spear-ends of their gaffi sticks making a bristling barrier.

Luke looked all around him at the grotesque faces, gauging what to do. He looked up to the rim two dozen feet above. Too high even for a Jedi's leap.

But his attention was brought back to the figures by the raised voices of those around him. Several were speaking up in their snarling, barking speech. They were directing terse, hostile phrases at the tall one who had caught him, and that being was responding as aggressively. They definitely seemed to be having an argument.

One warrior seemed to lose his temper and, with a snarl, drove in at Luke, thrusting out with his stick.

But before Luke could move to defend himself, the tall one had swung in a quick countermove, knocking the other back.

The tall one turned his gaze around at the rest, holding his gaffi stick up menacingly. No more challenged him.

"O-Tal. O-Tal," the tall warrior repeated emphatically, gesturing toward one opening.

To this there were answering murmurs of "O-Tal," and nodded heads. The group apparently agreed.

The warrior pointed his stick at Luke, then lifted the weapon toward the doorway in a clear gesture to his captive to go ahead.

"Fine. No argument," said Luke readily. He was only too pleased to obey the one amongst his captors who seemed to wish to keep him alive. At least, for the moment.

The tall one moved back and let Luke walk before him, through the same doorway the young Jedi had just tried to enter. The warrior and then his fellows followed close behind.

Luke stepped into what at first was a most dim room, lit only by the low flames of a few bowl-shaped lamps on poles. But his eyes soon adjusted, allowing him to see the surroundings clearly.

The curved, stuccoed walls and domed ceiling were covered with elaborate frescoes of stylized creatures, abstract shapes, and geometric patterns done in browns and golds. There were thick woven carpets with similar patterns on the stone floor. Other furnishings were extremely sparse. There was a pile of large pillows on the room's far side, and along one wall was a low table filled with an odd assortment of objects.

These attracted Luke's gaze. He took note of a power blender, the mechanical arm from a service droid, a pillow embroidered with a waterfall, an ivory handled dagger in a gold sheath, and a silver-framed mirror. But his attention fell most on a globe-shaped object of what seemed a smooth, milk-white glass. His eye lit with mixed recognition and elation.

The Sand People trooped in behind him. All but the large warrior lined up facing the platform. That one stepped close to it. With the club end of his stick, he struck a round, beaten-brass gong suspended beside it. The "clang" of the gong sounded loudly in the enclosed space.

He stepped back to stand beside Luke.

"The O-Tal will come soon," a harsh, deep, rolling, guttural voice said to Luke.

The young man looked around and up in wide-eyed astonishment to the source of the voice. It was the tall warrior beside him.

The being was not making more unintelligible sounds this time. He was speaking in Luke's own tongue!

CHAPTER 9

"You speak my language?" Luke said to the tall warrior. Both his surprise and a note of renewed hope were clear in his voice.

"It was learned from one of you," came the slowly enunciated reply as the being searched out the right words of a tongue little used. "A strange holy man of your kind who lived alone in the wastes taught me. The 'Wizard' we called him."

"You mean Ben Kenobi?" asked Luke, yet more amazed.

"Yes. Of all your kind, he was special. Touched by the gods."

"If he was considered special," Luke said, "then why did you tear his home apart?"

"We did not," the other said. "We removed some objects we felt were of great meaning to him, to keep them safe. Other bands who did not know him raided his dwelling later. Our tribe recognized a… a *power* about him and left him alone. He helped us in return. He became our friend." The tall one drew up, adding proudly, "And it was I, Jattal Or, who was chosen to learn from him so we might speak together. Rarely has this been done by the Ghorfas people."

"Old Ben," said Luke to himself. Then, to the warrior he said earnestly, "He was also my friend. He taught me too."

"I believe this," the being replied. "I sensed about you the same power I felt in him. It is part of the reason why you are still alive. Only our Chieftain, our O-Tal, will decide if it will keep you so."

Through this brief exchange, other warriors of the race had been entering the room. There were some fifty of them now, filling the open area before the piled cushions. All waited patiently in a kind of reverential hush.

The one they awaited now made his own entrance, coming in through a curtained opening in the back wall.

He was of thicker-set form than the rest, clad in a full flowing robe apparently made of the grey-green hides from several Dewback lizards which had been stitched together. Its voluminous skirts still barely wrapped the beefy figure with its broad shoulders and barrel chest. The being's masked head was massive, square, and topped with a circle of spikes of gleaming silver, as if they were a crown.

He stopped as he came in and his gaze fell on Skywalker. He spoke out in a jumbled mass of deep, booming consonants which still managed to convey his obvious surprise.

The one called Jattal Or translated for Luke:

"Our O-Tel is much amazed that our desert friends did not clean your bones, pale one."

The tall warrior then returned a long speech, to which the O-Tel listened. The chieftain then relied, stepping forward to look the young Jedi up and down more searchingly as he did.

"I told him you had escaped from both the Dune Maggots and the stakes," Jattal Or supplied to Luke, "but whether this was done by force or by cunning, I did not know. He said that, either way, your powers must be unusual, for such a thing has never happened before within this clan's memory."

"I was lucky," Luke said modestly.

"Then you should not have stretched that luck by returning here," Jattal Or told him.

The O-Tal turned and strode back to the cushions. He eased his bulk slowly down on the pile. It flattened considerably as it took the weight. He stared again at Luke for some moments, then spoke out demandingly.

"He wishes to know what you were after," the tall warrior explained. "Was it your weapons? That floating board of yours?"

"Something more, O-Tal," Luke said directly to the chief. "An object that your people... *took* from the house of a friend of mine." He pointed. "That milk-crystal bowl there."

Jattal Or translated. The O-Tal glanced toward the bowl and then back to Luke. His reply came with much tone of indignation.

"Took?" the big man interpreted for Luke, supplying the indignant tone as well. **"***Stole* is what you mean, don't you? Your kind always supposes us thieves, bandits, cutthroats of the worst kind."

"You did scavenge things from Ben Kenobi's place, didn't you?" Luke countered, this time speaking directly to Jattal Or. "And maybe from my uncle's moisture farm, too?"

"Ah, so you were of that Anchorhead farm dwelling?" the tall warrior said with raised eyebrow. "We thought they all were dead — killed by the white-armored warriors years ago. But it was other tribes, not our own, which…"

The O-Tal put in a testy interruption here. Jattal Or bowed low.

"I have forgotten myself," said the warrior to Luke. Our Chieftain wishes to understand."

He proceeded to pass Luke's words on to his O-Tal. The other listened, nodded, then replied.

"'Yes,' he says," Jattal Or translated. "Certainly we went through that long-abandoned place, and the one of the old wizard too. It was our right. Those places were our own until *you* stole them from us."

" *We* didn't do that," said Luke, thrown on the defensive now. "My uncle's grandfather bought that farm from the land dealers."

"Who got all their lands by running off or killing any of our people who lived upon them," the clan chief responded bitterly

through his warrior. “So it was all over Tatooine when the Offworlders came. The best of the lands and the dwellings were taken by them, and we forced out into the worst territories left.”

“I never knew about any of that,” Luke told him earnestly. “None of us know anything about you. Nothing about your customs, your language, how you live.”

“No. So you just assumed we were savages or, worse, less than beasts.”

“It’s not entirely our fault,” Luke argued. “You hide away out here, never make any contact with settlers, wear masks...”

“The ‘mask,’ as you call it, shields us from sand and sun, filters air, preserves our breath’s moisture, and keeps us alive in the harsh climate that you have driven us to. We hide to preserve what life and possessions we still have. And if we do take revenge upon those who have defiled our homes and shrines, then that should be our right, as few others are left to us.”

Behind the listening clans, and all but ignored by them, another masked warrior came into the room. He had a face piece that had been damaged somehow, a ragged tear marring the cloth of one cheek, one eye goggle knocked askew, and two spikes gone. As the talk continued, the latecomer quietly joined with the rest and stood intently listening.

“Look, I’m sorry for the way you’ve been treated,” Luke was explaining through Jattal Or. “I really am. But, now that I know more about you, maybe I can help. We could work together. Have a better relationship...”

“We have no wish to be closer to you,” the big warrior passed back to him from the chief in a brusque way. “All that we wish is to be left alone.”

"All right, then," Luke said agreeably. "We could stay separate, but we could still live together with more mutual respect. There could be more communications, maybe. Trade. I mean, most of your raiding is to get goods and tools for survival, isn't it? Maybe some understanding could make life easier for you."

When Jattal Or translated this, there were murmurings in the assembly at the offer. Some sounded pro, some con. But the cons seemed predominant. The O-Tal listened, considered, then shook his head.

"No," he responded firmly through Jattal Or. "The Clans of the Ghorfas have lost much, but not their true spirit. We will not open ourselves to see that spirit despoiled for a reward, no matter how great." The immense spirit of pride welling out from the chief also filled the robust, rolling voice of the warrior as he went on. "You and your people will come and go, but we have always been here and always will be. We are as with the sand of our desert: the ill winds may blow it from place to place, but still the grains endure."

Luke listened gravely, musingly to this. He sighed and nodded his acceptance.

"I understand you, O-Tal, better than you might think," he said sincerely. "I admire your knowing so certainly just who you are and grasping so fiercely to it. All right. So, if you won't deal, then, what about me? What will you do?"

"Your violation of our clan precincts should mean swift execution," the other replied. "But the words of Jattal Or weigh heavily. Like him, I also feel the strange energy of the old Wizard in you. And it does seem as if destiny has decreed something else for you. If a greater power is at work here, we dare not defy it. You must have at least some chance to win yourself free."

"How, by a trial of some kind?" Luke guessed.

The O-Tal explained. Jattal Or translated tersely:

"You against our clan's champion. To the death. Should you win, your transport and weapons will be returned, and you will be let go."

"Against your champion," said Luke. He ran an appraising eye up the towering form of the warrior beside him. "Let me guess. It's you."

When Jattal Or translated that, the O-Tal gave a robust laugh. He clapped his hands sharply and called out: "Dovra Ackru!"

The curtains of the doorway shivered as someone started through.

"It couldn't get worse," murmured Luke.

Out through the curtain stepped a figure who made Jattal Or seem almost of average size. Both broad and tall, he towered over Luke's comparatively slight form.

"It's worse," Luke said.

"Meet Dovra Ackru," introduced the interpreter. "Our finest warrior!"

The huge warrior's response was a low, sharp growl, like than of an irritated Rancor that had missed a meal.

"Nice to meet you," Luke said politely, forcing his mouth up in a somewhat tight smile.

The muscles of Han Solo's face tightened with effort as he heaved upward on the piece of luggage.

"Geez, Leia," he gasped through the strain, "whaddya got packed in these... planetary cores?"

He finally managed to wrestle the big traveling case out of the cart of the baggage train and set it down next to a half-dozen others already lined up on the hanger bay floor.

The Millennium Falcon sat with boarding ramp open, ready to receive the cargo of luggage. Gowan and Leia stood by it, watching Solo work.

"They're only clothes," she told him defensively, "All necessary for the mission."

"Ooof," grunted Solo, hefting another one out. "Necessary? What happened to traveling light?"

"This is a protocol expedition, not a military one," she explained. "There are many formalities to be observed, including the proper dress."

"That's true, old man," Gowan put in. "You know, you might do with a bit of a sprucer yourself. Do you possess garments besides those you have on?"

Han looked down at his battered old boots, worn trousers and vest, and frayed shirt.

"Yeah, I possess other garments," he replied acerbically. Look, 'old man' when you're in a war, there's no time for a wardrobe... at least not for a *fighting* man."

"Excuse me?" said Gowan, bridling himself at the insinuation, "do you mean to imply that I…"

Leia quickly stepped in. "Look, boys, could we just get the things aboard? There are only three hours left until we're supposed to be taking off."

Han shrugged. "Okay Princess. Whatever you say." He picked up one case with an effort, using both hands. Then he looked to Gowan. "You wanna give me a hand with these, pal?"

The other stepped over. He picked up a case in each hand as if they weighed nothing, shot Solo a disdainful glance, and walked off toward the ramp.

Han glared after him with resentment, then looked around at Leia.

"Ah, he took the light ones," he said with scorn.

In reply, Leia took up a case herself with apparent ease, gave him a little grin, and followed after Gowan.

Han watched her go, looked down at his own case in disbelief, shook his head, and started after her. But he stopped as a voice called to him:

"Han! Wait a minute!"

Solo looked around to see Wedge striding toward him. He stopped to wait, letting the other two go up into the ship.

Wedge reached him, eying the case in his hands. "They got you playing your own porter as well now?" he asked.

"My idea." said Han, setting it down. "I don't want anyone else even getting near the Falcon before we take off."

"Do you know where we're going yet?"

Han smiled somewhat smugly. "I'm the only one who does. I told Mon Mathma about it, and she agreed to keep the location to myself until we're well outta here. Not even Leia knows."

Wedge nodded. "Good idea. Don't take chances." He moved closer to speak more confidentially. "There's something odd going on around here that gives me a bad feeling. They found one of Blue Flight dead today."

"Dead?" Han said, surprised.

"Fell down a maintenance shaft it looked like. Twenty stories at least. Broke his neck, along with about everything else. Poor devil

must've lain there a day or two before someone found him. But there's something strange about it."

"Not an accident?" asked Han.

Wedge shrugged. "I don't know about that. The thing is, he took his fighter on routine patrol the day before yesterday, no question of it. Ground crew checked him out, even talked to him."

"So?" prompted Han.

"So, deck records say he never came back. And..." he added, "*his ship is missing!*"

Han frowned at that. "You're right about that bad feeling," he said. "I don't know what it means, but I don't like it."

"Should we tell the Princess?"

"She's got enough problems to think about. I'm just glad we're taking off soon. And, I'll tell you, I won't set a course for that meeting spot until we've zig-zagged around first. I want to be damn sure there's nobody on our tail."

"Very wise," said Wedge. "Well, I've got to get Gold Squadron prepped to escort you. See you later."

"Yeah," said Han as the young pilot started away. "And keep me posted on whatever else you hear."

Wedge threw an acknowledging wave back to him as he went out of the bay. Solo picked up his case again and headed for the ramp.

At its base he met Leia, just coming back down. She looked past him to the dwindling figure of Wedge.

"Wasn't that Captain Antilles?" she asked.

"Oh, him? Yeah, guess it was," he said absently.

"Well, what did he want?" she demanded.

"Nothin' really," Solo casually lied. "Just checking on progress. I told him we'd be ready to go in time."

"Not if Chewie and Threepio don't get back soon," she said in an unsettled way. "Where are they, Han?"

"I told you to relax," he soothed. "They'll get here. Prob'ly just had trouble getting a part or something. It'll be okay. Trust me."

She gave him a skeptical eye. "I've heard *that* before." Then, more somberly, she added, "I'm just worried that something will go wrong. This is so big, Han. So important." She sighed regretfully, "I wish that Luke were here."

"Yeah, me too," he agreed. "But, he's lot's better off being well out of this!"

CHAPTER 10

The big hands adeptly fitted a leather sheath about the leg and fastened its straps, covering the limb from ankle to thigh.

"You're sure this is necessary?" Luke Skywalker asked as he stood watching the big warrior named Jattal Or armoring his leg.

"Absolutely, pale one," the other assured as he buckled the last strap to a wide belt about Luke's waist. "The beast's bristly hide would sand the trousers and then the skin from your leg in moments without it. Is it comfortable now?"

The young Jedi moved the leg. "It's all right. But, call me Luke. That's my name."

"If you wish, pale Luke."

Jattal Or set about fastening a second sheath around the young Jedi's other leg. While he worked, Luke looked across the open area beside the central pit to where the giant champion stood. A few other warriors of the clan stood around him, watching him in like preparation. But all save the interpreting one seemed to be keeping a safe distance from the strange outsider.

Dovra Ackru had shed his outer long robe. He stretched his massive body up, spreading his arms. It was an impressive display of size and reach, Luke evaluated.

Jattal Or straightened after finishing the second leg. He handed two other leather pieces to Luke.

"Here," he said. "The arms must be done too. See to that while I gather the rest."

He strode off. Luke began to pull one of the leather protectors up an arm to shield him from his wrist to past his elbow. As he worked, another warrior detached himself from the watching group to approach the young Jedi. He was a lean and battered figure with a

ragged tear in one cheek of his mask, an eyepiece knocked askew, and some head spikes broken.

Apparently braver than the rest of his folk, he moved up close to Luke. The Jedi paused and looked quizzically to the being.

"I've awaited this chance to speak to you alone," the man said in a low, husky tone, looking around in a cautious way to see if anyone was watching.

"You speak too?" asked a startled Luke.

"Careful," the man warned. "None here know I have the speech. They must not know."

"Why?"

"Because I am not like the others. I have gone out from the clans and lived with your kind. They would not trust me if they knew. But I have learned acceptance. I do not wish to be your enemy. I most certainly do not wish to see you die. But, this fight, it will surely kill you."

"I'm not dead yet," Luke told him.

"A matter of time only," the other said grimly. "Have you ever ridden a bantha before?"

"Only once," Luke admitted. "It was tame enough."

"On Tatooine, a tame bantha is a bantha who has bonded with its Rider. If you came across one here, its Rider must have perished and the beast was wandering in search of him. For this contest, you will be offered an unbonded bantha, which is quite different, and a most difficult beast. Impossible for an unskilled rider. And for you to fight from its back as well..." he shook his head. "No, you must use the power of the Force to aid you."

"The Force?" Luke looked at him with surprise. "But, how do you..."

The man held up a hand, looked around him, then leaned in to speak even more quietly:

"I told you, I have not stayed so separate from your world as the rest here. I know of the young Skywalker who went off to become a Jedi. That also is why I so much wish to help you. I realize you might be of great boon to us. You could help to lead us at last in a new way. But to survive to do so, you must first use your wizard's skills to win."

"I can't do that," Luke said.

"You must," the man argued. "Even if in some way you could control the bantha, Dovra Ackru will be a fierce opponent. Why, for him to becobanthame champion of such a warrior race should speak of what an outstanding fighter he must be."

Luke glanced across to the giant figure again. "I had thought of that," he said, then shrugged. "Even so, I can't cheat. I'm a sworn Jedi Knight. I have to stay true to my principles. I won't use the Force to take unfair advantage."

"Not even to make more equal your chances in such an unfair contest?"

"Look, I can't gauge how much it's going to be that," Luke told him, "no matter what you say. And I sure won't risk using any tricks that might just make it easier for me to kill him. So it's got to be a straight fight, no extra help at all."

"You are a fool then," the warrior said in frustration. He considered, then tried again, "Well, if *you* will not act to improve your own chances, perhaps you will let *me* do something *for* you."

Luke eyed him narrowly. "What do you mean?"

"I can at least see that you have an easier ride—if you'll only listen and do what I say."

"I'll listen," Luke said guardedly, "but, no promises."

"Very well. When they bring up the banthas, you will have to choose one. That is your right. Look for one with a twisted horn. That

one should be your pick of mounts. It will be the most docile, the most easy to direct. Do this one thing. You will be able to have *some* chance in the fight, anyway."

Luke thought it over, then nodded. "All right. I'll go that far. But if this is some kind of a trap…"

"I could trap you no more tightly than you have already trapped yourself, young Jedi," the other pointed out. "I assure you, I very much wish to see you stay alive." His *eye* was caught by the figure of Jattal Or coming back toward them. "Ah, and now I must go," he said hurriedly. "Remember, none must know I've talked with you of this."

He scuttled away back into the crowd, vanishing as Jattal Or reached Luke. The tall warrior now carried a chest plate of thick leather, a pointed skull cap of beaten gold metal, and a curved stick. The stick was typical of the instruments all the warriors carried, knobbed on one end and fitted with cutting blades and a long point at the other.

"We call this a 'gaderffii,'" the interpreter explained, dropping the other equipment. "A gaffi stick to you. In the contest it will serve you in two ways." He pointed to the blade end. "With this end you may either slash or jab." He made some swings and thrusts with it in demonstration, then handed the instrument to Luke.

The Jedi swung it about, first tentatively, then with swiftly growing skill. The other watched him, clearly impressed.

"Not too bad," Or judged. He shook his head. "A pity. You might have learned to use it well had you any more time left to you."

"And you don't think I have," said Luke.

"I have seen him fight others," Or said. "I have fought him myself." He touched a shoulder. "The deep scar from that is with me still. I think there are none who can beat that one."

"You know, you people are really building my confidence," Luke said. He looked again at the stick. "But, you said this had two purposes. What's the other?"

"The club end is to control the beast you ride. You have no other means."

"So, how does it work?"

"Very simple. The Bantha is far from a stupid beast, but it is most stubborn. To make it turn to the right, you strike the left side of the head. To go left, strike the other. Use some power in it. They also have a most thick skull."

"How about going and stopping?"

"Slapping its rear with the stick will goad it forward. Rapping the top of the skull makes it stop. Plan your moves well ahead if you can. The beast is slow to react. That is where the rider's skill is most important." The warrior looked around at a low, bleating sound. "Oh, here they come."

Luke looked around too. Up a ramp from their underground corral two score banthas were plodding, driven by several warriors with the sticks. They were herded to a wide spot beside the central pit.

A closer examination of the animals did little to dispel the first impression of their ugliness. They were tall, broad behemoths, their thick legs, long tails and hulking bodies covered with wiry masses of hair. The blunt muzzles of their massive heads sported short tusks and oozing nostrils flanked by tiny eyes. On either side of the wide skulls, set high and well forward, were the tight spirals of large, hard-boned horns, as if butting were the chief weapon of the beasts.

And the bantha's smell was in full keeping with its looks. Even out in the open, their pungent, gamey odor was strong in the air.

As others of the tribe gathered around, the O-Tal made his appearance, moving to a spot before the herd. His champion at once joined him and, at Or's direction, Luke did too.

"You must now choose your banthas," the O-Tal formally announced to Luke through his translator.

Dovra Ackru quickly looked them over and pointed out a broad chested, grey fellow.

Luke took longer, looking them over carefully. None with an odd horn was visible at first. But then one bellowed and moved aside as another behind shouldered by it into view. This one had a horn whose outward skew made it different from any of the rest.

Luke pointed it out. "I'll take that one."

"That?" said the O-Tal. He stared hard at the rather small, rather nondescript animal, then shrugged. "Very well."

The chieftain turned to face the two contestants, speaking gravely now as Jattal Or interpreted:

"You will fight within our ring. To try to break out of it means death."

"I don't intend to run," Luke assured.

"We will see," said the chieftain, "You will fight from bantha back until one or another is unseated. The battle may then be continued on foot by both... if the remaining one chooses."

"If not?" asked Luke.

"The one still mounted may choose to simply run the other down," the O-Tal explained. "Either way, the contest is not concluded until one can fight no longer. Do you understand?"

"It's clear enough," said Luke. "I'm ready."

"Then, mount your banthas," the O-Tal ordered.

Luke and Dovra Ackru donned chest plates and helmets, then went to the animals. Luke stepped to the towering side of his beast, looked up it, and took a grip on the bristling hair. He gave a grimace of pain.

He gripped the beast's hair higher up and hauled himself the rest of the eight feet, getting onto its back. Here he looked around to see that his opponent was already astride his own mount, straddling its shoulders, one leg on either side of the thick neck. He quickly assumed the same position. The flat skull-top and curled masses of horn were just before him.

Meanwhile two dozen of the warriors had mounted other banthas. With shouts and energetic swats of their sticks they sent the beasts shambling forward.

The mounted warriors spread apart, riding out past the last of the dwelling-pits and into a stretch of level, hard-packed ground beyond. Here they formed into a rough circle some two hundred yards around.

"It is time, pale Luke," said Jattal Or, handing the gaffi stick up to the young Jedi. "May your fight be noble and your end an honorable one."

"Thanks... I think," said Luke. He reached down for the stick, firmly resettled himself, and looked around to the O- Tal,

The stocky chieftain looked from his champion to Luke. He nodded at their readiness. He lifted an arm again.

He stood that way a moment, poised between the two beasts, while combatants and onlookers watched expectantly. Then the arm dropped.

Dovra Ackru swung his stick back and gave his bantha several taps on the rump. The animal lumbered forward. Luke followed suit, and his beast fell in beside the champion's.

The two mounts walked out to the center of the ring. Here the huge warrior struck the left side of his beast's head, just behind the horn. It turned away at a right angle. Luke watched his actions and tapped his own bantha on the right side. A look of relief came into his face as it readily complied, turning the opposite way.

As the two neared the cordon of warriors at either side of the ring, Dovra Ackru turned his mount again. Again Luke followed, his steering tap obeyed immediately.

"Atta boy," he murmured to the beast. "Just keep going along with me."

As the two beasts swung to face each other, champion and then Jedi tapped them atop the skulls. The banthas stopped at once. For a moment the two riders stared across at one another, Luke intense, Dovra apparently at ease.

Then the champion's mouth opened with an earsplitting trill. He gave his mount a great smack across the rear. It bellowed and lunged forward.

Luke urged his own beast forward, and it responded instantly. Soon both animals were heading toward one another at a ponderous, earthshaking lope.

They plunged together on a collision course. While they neared, the giant warrior stayed intent on Luke, weapon held ready, and showed no signs of wavering. The novice Luke held on as long as he could, but when a crash seemed almost inevitable, he tapped his bantha's skull on the right side. It veered away with an instant to spare.

He avoided collision, but his break gave Dovra Ackru the advantage. The sharp turn threw Luke sideways. He grabbed at the coarse neck hair to keep his balance, lowering his guard. As the

champion swept by, he struck out at the vulnerable young Jedi. The edge of one blade struck Luke's shoulder, slicing across it.

The keen edge drew a line of blood there as it ripped through both the tunic and the flesh of the biceps beneath.

It was only a surface wound, but the pain and surprise made Luke grunt and jerk away.

The champion's reflexes were lightning ones. As soon as his bantha was past Luke's, he was whacking it around in a hard right turn. It wheeled tightly and swiftly for such a bulky beast.

Luke, momentarily distracted by his wound, was slow to bring his own gaffi stick into play. The advantage might have once more fallen to Dovra Ackru, but Luke's bantha seemed to anticipate his needed move. Without direction it swung itself around in the same direction to face the giant warrior's beast squarely again.

Once more they plunged in head-to-head. But this time the quickly learning Luke held onto the course as stubbornly as his opponent. The beasts charged together, seemingly ready to butt heads in a monumental crash, neither rider giving way.

But the animals' own senses of self-preservation avoided a collision. Both veered slightly away at the last second, sweeping by each other so closely that their bristling coats rasped together,

Again Dovra Ackru took a passing stroke at Luke. Prepared, the Jedi parried, slamming his weapon away with a power that sent the champion jerking back. When the two bantha's swept apart, the warrior swiveled his head around to stare back at Luke in a gesture clearly indicating surprise. This slender, pale one was showing himself to be a fair opponent.

Now made aware that his first tactic would not work again, Dovra Ackru swiftly shifted to another. Waiting to see which way

Luke turned, he this time urged his mount around in an opposite wheel. He slapped its rump hard and trilled sharply into its ear to goad it on. The beast charged ahead with a burst of greater speed.

As his mount came around, Luke realized the champion's new ploy—too late. He swung his stick over to prod his bantha the other way, but not in time to keep his opponent from moving in behind him. Instead he slapped the beast to greater speed in an attempt to keep ahead. Soon it was loping along in a wide curve, just within the ring of mounted warriors. But the big warrior's bantha was running a smaller arc within Luke's, and it was drawing closer.

Dovra Ackru swung out at Luke as soon as he came in range. He leaned out across the space between the plunging beasts to launch a salvo of savage blows.

Luke found himself hard pressed to keep his seat and fight to the rear while half-twisted around. He parried the blows as best he could with one hand while hanging on with the other.

One of the champion's cuts slipped past his guard and slashed down across his back, laying open a flap of both cloth and skin. Another clipped the jutting point from the top of Luke's metal cap.

Finally Dovra Ackru managed to swing his weapon under and up to lock a blade behind one of Luke's. With a two-handed twist and yank the powerful warrior tore the weapon free of the young Jedi's grasp.

It lifted high and flew far off, turning lazily end-over-end to land point down, half burying itself in the ground.

The champion gave a loud bellow of triumph. His gaffi stick swept up to strike again, its bright blades glinting in the sun.

CHAPTER 11

Luke's bantha suddenly lurched sharply sideways.

It slammed its shoulder hard into the side of the other beast's head in what seemed a deliberate blocking move. Dovra Ackru's bantha was jolted off stride by the blow. The champion was jerked back, his blade dropping.

The weaponless young Jedi took swift advantage of the opening. In a desperate countermove he drew his legs up, crouched, and sprang across onto the other beast.

The huge warrior once more lifted the gaffi stick to strike, but his reaction was too slow. Luke dove in, seizing the stick as well, and the two grappled, yanking and twisting savagely at the weapon as each sought to win control of it.

They swayed precariously atop the still loping beast. Luke scrambled for a hold on its back with only his legs as he battled with both hands. The champion fought back from a secure position, his leg's locked tight about its neck.

His strength was more than a match for Luke's, and his position gave him the advantage. He used it cunningly.

After a brief tussle, he twisted abruptly away from Luke, heaved hard, and hauled the Jedi bodily over his *head.* With nothing to hold to, the young man found himself flying over the warrior's shoulders as he rolled them forward and plunging down the front of the bantha's face.

His grip on the stick broke. He toppled over the muzzle, grasping out at anything to stop himself. He ceased falling, but only to find himself suspended from the beast's wide nose, hanging on to its formidable lower tusks.

This unlikely position he held only a moment. The bantha snorted loudly and opened its mouth to give a deep, resounding bleat of anger.

Luke stared down the wet cavern of its huge throat as its rank breath blasted into his face. Then his hands slipped from the tusks and he fell, dropping between the hairy pillars of the pumping front legs and vanishing from sight beneath the animal.

The bantha continued in its lumbering run, Dovra Ackru turned to look back, clearly expecting to see Luke's trampled form churned through and kicked out behind.

But the Jedi was not yet finished. He hung now from the belly of the beast by a stubborn grip on its shaggy fur, his legs and rear end dragging on the ground. He glanced back along the bantha's underside to where the giant hind legs stomped ahead like a pair of pile drivers on either side of the dragging mass of tail. Only death by crushing awaited him there.

The only way was back up. So, gritting his teeth against the pain of grasping the harsh fur, Luke began to haul himself up and around the curve of the great chest, crawling out behind the right front leg and climbing the beast's side.

Dovra Ackru still sat staring rearward, his strained posture indicative of mounting puzzlement. He turned back toward the front and leaned far forward, peering down past his mount's head, seeking some sign of his vanished opponent.

He thus didn't see the left hand of Luke shoot up to grab hold in the hair of the beast's back close behind him. It was only when the young man's head lifted into view that the movement caught the corner of the champion's eye. His own head whipped around, and he

stared in surprise, but only for an instant. Then his right arm was sweeping the weapon around and down in a hard chop at Luke.

But his swing was wide to avoid hitting the beast too. Luke flattened against its side as the blade whistled past his skull. Then in a final, full effort of will and strength, he shot his right arm up toward the warrior. His hand went for Dovra Ackru's middle, grabbing hold of the leggings' waist strap. He yanked toward him as he fell backward from the animal, his weight drawing the other with him. Already overbalanced by his wasted swing, the champion had no chance to recover. The two plummeted from the bantha together.

Luke struck the ground on his shoulders and back, somersaulting on over to land on his hands and knees.

He was on his feet instantly, crouched to meet his opponent's next attack,

But Dovra Ackru had sailed beyond him, crashing down on his face with his full, massive weight. He lay crumpled and motionless a few feet from Luke.

The Jedi stepped to the fallen warrior, moving warily, ready for a trick. With a foot he prodded the being's side, getting no result. Luke knelt and rolled him over. Dovra Ackru fell back limply. He was breathing but seemed to be stunned. The bantha stick dropped from his opened hand.

Luke picked the weapon up and rose to his feet. As he did, the champion gave a sharp groan and pushed himself up on his elbows. But he stopped moving abruptly as his gaze fell upon the glinting metal point held close over her chest.

He stayed motionless, clearly waiting for the end.

But Luke stood motionless as well, only looking down at the warrior.

"You do not kill him?" called a voice.

He looked around to see the O-Tal and Jattal Or striding up to him, a crowd of the Sand People close behind.

The mounted warriors who had formed the ring were riding in too, pulling up in a tighter circle around him.

"You really expect me to kill your champion?" Luke asked the chieftain through Jattal Or.

The O-Tal shrugged. "It is a part of the contest," he responded through his translator. "'To the death' I said. He understands that."

"Well, I don't," Luke replied sharply. "It's over. I'm not killing someone just to prove something to you."

The chieftain eyed him thoughtfully. "So, you will not kill, even if it means you would save your own life?"

Luke looked from him around at the circle of armed warriors staring grim-faced down from their mounts, then back to the O-Tal. "No, not even for that," he said firmly. "If I truly am a Jedi Knight, I won't dishonor the name." He cast the weapon down at the O-Tal's feet.

Dovra Ackru sat up, obviously both surprised and bewildered by his clemency. His chieftain bent and took up the gaffi stick. He looked from its keen blades to the young man and spoke in solemn tones.

"He says you are indeed not like the others of your kind," Jattal Or pronounced with great conviction. "None has ever acted toward us with such good intention or honesty. Nor have we ever seen one of your race or even of our own fight with such amazing skill. He believes, as I do, that it truly is some powerful fate which guides your actions here, and we must give it no more argument." He bowed to

Luke, “He accepts the life of his warrior from you Luke Skywalker, and gives you your own in return.”

The worn and battered young man took a deep breath and smiled in relief, “Thank you,” he said most sincerely.

Leia and Gowan sat at the small table in the main cabin of the Millennium Falcon. Their heads were close together as they went over the information scrolling by on the datapad screen opened before them, discussing in muted tones the finer points of Imperial protocols on display.

Across the cabin, Han Solo checked the instrument readings on a bank of systems screens and cast sidelong, disgruntled glances toward the pair. He spoke in muted tones also, but only to himself,

A loud “gronk” from the open boarding ramp brought the attention of all three around to it. Chewbacca was just coming up it, ducking under the low hatch to step into the cabin. Behind him, C-3P0 was clanking up and into the ship.

“Well, look who finally got here,” said Han Solo, his sarcasm not quite hiding his relief. “I was actually starting to wonder about you guys. Not that I’d worry or anything,”

“Do you know what time it is?” a scowling Leia asked the pair. “We’re supposed to be leaving within the hour!”

Chewbacca gave an abashed-sounding whimper at that rebuke, but the droid’s response was prim:

“We are well aware of the time, Princess Leia. You will most assuredly not be delayed in your departure.”

“I suppose not,” she had to admit, the sternness fading from her tone. “Still, we were concerned.”

"Look, let's cut the chatter," Han put in getting to his feet. "We've got too much to do. Threepio, run a last diagnostic on the Falcon's navicomp systems. Got to be ready to feed our destination coordinates once we're away."

"And I have work for you as well," Leia told the droid. "You're going to be going along with us as our chief assistant."

"I see," Threepio replied flatly, clearly unaffected by the news.

"I *thought* that you'd be pleased," she said.

"Yeah, Golderod," put in Han. "You were complaining about bein' left out. Here's a chance for some excitement. You oughta thank Her Highness."

"I see no reason to do so," Threepio replied reasoningly. "I had assumed I would be chosen to go. What other protocol droid has my experience?"

"Now hold on," Han began, sounding a bit miffed at the droid's somewhat lacking graciousness.

"No," said Lela defensively. "He's right. He's worked hard for this. He does deserve it."

Han's irritation subsided, "Yeah. I guess."

"Well then," Threepio said briskly, starting away toward a service corridor, "If that's all decided, I'll go see to Captain Solo's diagnostic. It is, as usual, my job to insure that things run smoothly."

"We're real honored you can help," said Han dryly. "Chewie and I need to run a last check." He looked to the Wookiee. "You did get that spare rotor, didn't you?"

Chewie lifted a small box and barked an affirmative.

"Good," said Han. Then, reminded of something else, he turned to call after the droid. "Hey, wait, Threepio. What about my ale?"

The golden being paused at the corridor opening and looked back to him.

"I was unable to find any," Threepio replied. "And, speaking frankly, Master Solo, your physique might well benefit by your being without it."

With that parting comment, he went off into the corridor.

Han stared after the droid for a nonplussed moment, then said indignantly, "My physique?"

He looked down at himself and pinched the flesh of his belly in assessment. He looked around to Leia.

"Was that hunk of metal making a crack about my weight?" he asked her.

Leia looked Han over with an amused but critical eye.

"I'd say he was right again," was her own judgement.

A big hand smoothed the thick, white ointment onto an inflamed welt across Luke Skywalker's shoulder with surprising gentleness.

The shirtless young Jedi sat patiently on a stool in the throne room of the O-Tal while Jattal Or tended to his wounds. He had many of these. The fight with the dune maggots and his contest with Dovra Ackru had left little of his torso unmarked by vivid welts, bruises, and cuts.

The O-Tal—at the moment the room's only other occupant—looked on from his rattan throne as his translator carefully smeared more ointment from an earthenware pot over the last welts. He was clearly admiring of the young man's stoicism.

"He says that it is much you have endured in this one day," Jattal Or passed on to Luke. "The desert, the torture, the fight. Are you certain you want no time for rest?"

"No, I'm fine, really," Luke said. "Just a little sore."

"The salve will help with that," the man assured. "Many generations have found their healing in it. It is squeezed from the tendrils of a rare desert plant. Most miraculous."

The warrior finished his effort, setting the jar down beside him. "Work some also into your hands, young champion," he told Luke. "It will sooth them as well."

"Thanks," Luke told him. He looked at his palms. They were bright red, their outer layer of skin all but flayed away by the sanding action of the bantha's hair.

He scooped a blob of cream out of the jar and rubbed his sensitized palms gingerly together, massaging it in. The soothing effects showed clearly in his face.

"Miraculous for sure," he said. "Even Yoda's use of the Force couldn't heal like this."

"I have no knowledge of this one you speak of," said Jattal Or, "but for one of your powers to speak so is a compliment to us."

Luke finished working the cream in. He took up the tunic that lay across his lap and slipped it back on, rising from the stool.

"Well, I thank you," he told the chieftain and warrior graciously, "but now I should be going."

Jattal Or translated for his chief, and the O-Tal replied.

"He says 'Very well,'" the other passed back with the included tone of regret. "But if you mean to depart from us so soon, he has some things for you." He lifted his voice to call out: "Dovra Ackru!"

Out through the curtained opening stepped the huge warrior. He carried the Jedi's utility belt with its equipment pouches and weapons all on it.

"We are most happy to return your weapons to you," Jattal said. "Especially this one." He respectfully touched the lightsaber's hilt, then pointed to Dovra Ackru's head. The big warrior turned it to show a large bandage across one ear.

"The O-Tal says it was his own fault," Jattal Or translated for the chief. "He was examining it and accidentally turned it on."

The translator took the belt and handed it to Luke.

"It took only a part of his ear," he added for himself. "A good lesson about the danger of curiosity."

"Your floating platform is on the surface, ready for you," the O-Tal passed to Luke as the Jedi buckled the belt on. "But there is something else."

The chieftain rose and walked to the long table of scavenged objects. He picked up the milk-white globe and turned to Luke, speaking most gravely.

"You came to find this," explained Jattal Or. "We sensed it had special value to our friend the old wizard, who was also friend to you. You risked your life for it, so we now make you a gift of it, as you too have become our friend."

The chieftain held it out. Luke stepped forward and carefully took it from him. The young Jedi held the smooth bowl in his hands, looking in wonder at it. It was all but glowing in the subdued light of the room.

"I thank you especially for this," he told the chieftain through Jattal Or.

"He says that clearly there is a great meaning in this thing for you," the translator returned to him. "Might he know what it is?"

"I don't really know myself," Luke told him truthfully. "It might be the secret to my whole life."

"Then we will pray that it reveal itself to you." The O-Tal answered.

He gestured to his champion. Dovra Ackru stepped up and handed Luke a large cloth carrying bag. The Jedi slipped the bowl inside and slung the bag across a shoulder.

"Now we are ready to go," Jattal Or announced. "The others wait above to say farewell."

They escorted Luke up out of the central meeting pit. On the surface beside it all the other warriors of the clan had gathered about his hovering sand skimmer.

As Luke and his escort approached it, one warrior stepped from the group and handed Jattal Or Luke's long outer robe.

"I say good-bye to you for all my people," the translator told Luke as he passed him the garment. "For myself I wish to say that I am not sorry you survived. I feel it was for the right."

"I'm glad you think so," Luke replied. "But he might have won. It was as much luck as anything that kept me alive. That… and that bantha."

"The beast was indeed a most clever one," Jattal Or agreed. "Too bad it has vanished."

"Vanished?" Luke echoed. "How?"

"When the riders came in from their ring, it had already run away," the warrior supplied. "No matter. Stray beasts usually wander back soon enough."

"I hope that one does," said Luke, "I owe it."

He slipped into the robe and stepped up to his skimmer. As he began to mount, the O-Tal's hand fell on his arm, stopping him. He turned to look at the chief.

"He would wish that you might stay," Jattal Or translated with feeling. "He believes now that there might be value in more talk between our people and those as honorable as you. There could be very much that we might learn of each other's lives."

"I hope that someday I can come back," Luke sincerely returned. "I truly do. But, for now I have a long way to go."

The O-Tal listened to his warrior's translation of this. He nodded and replied.

"He says, 'I understand.'" Jattal Or explained. "You have a warrior's quest. It cannot be denied."

The chieftain stepped back and let him climb onto the platform, but said something more as he did so.

"The O-Tal says not to be in too great a hurry, young warrior," said Jattal Or. "Already your boldness has put you in much peril. You act as if some relentless enemy pursued you."

Luke gave a little smile. "Only myself."

"Our most dangerous foe," the warrior said gravely. He lifted a hand in farewell. "May the Breath be always at your back."

Luke waved in answer, twisted the skimmer's hand controls, and sent the little machine gliding away.

The others waved too as they watched him go. Several warriors ran up the big, nearby dune to see him sweep away and shrink down to a distant speck.

When he vanished from sight, they began to walk down from the mound. One warrior stumbled and looked around indignantly to see what had tripped him up.

His eyes widened and he gave a cry of alarm. Other warriors rushed to him and stood staring wide-eyed too.

A hand, its fingers splayed and stiff, protruded from the ground.

One warrior knelt and began to brush the sand away,

An arm and then the top of a buried form came into view. As the warrior scooped more sand from about it, what was piled on top suddenly avalanched down, revealing the masked face of a Tuskan clansman.

It had a jagged tear in one cheek, a goggled eyepiece was askew, and two of its headspikes were gone.

CHAPTER 12

The Millennium Falcon blasted away from the mountain base and up into the stratosphere. On either side of it flew a trio of the sleek X-wing fighters from Wedge's escorting Gold Squadron.

Once they had torn free of the planet's glowing cloak of atmosphere and plunged for some distance into reassuringly empty space, Han Solo went to work in the Falcon's cockpit. He sat bent forward in the pilot's seat while he painstakingly punched out a number series on the buttons of the control console. The console beeped and bopped under his playing fingers like some shrilly pitched musical instrument.

With a final and quite melodic little chord tapped out, Solo stopped, eyed the readout, and gave a nod of satisfaction. He got up, looking around to Chewie in the copilot's seat.

"Just keep an eye on things here, partner," he told the Wookiee. "She'll be flyin' herself for a while now. I'm going to fill in our royal passengers."

He went out the hatchway and along the short corridor to the central cabin. There Gowan sat alone, playing a chess-like game against himself at the holographic games table. The 3-D images of various monstrous beings that formed the playing pieces moved warily about one another on the round game grid feinting for positions. There were no direct assaults. Gowan's method of play seemed to call for devious strategy, not violence.

"Hey, Gow, where's Leia?" Han asked, looking around for her.

The man looked up to him. "Ah. She just went to change."

"Change?" Han repeated quizzically. "To wha..."

He cut off abruptly as his *eye* was caught by a figure which appeared from another corridor.

It was Leia, but a much transformed one. The tight braids were gone, replaced by a loose, soft fall of glowing chestnut hair. Her usual tunic and trousers had been exchanged for a long gown of lush deep green, fitted to reveal her figure.

Han stared at her with some surprise. This was by far the most feminine and alluring outfit he had yet seen her in, not including the revealing slave outfit once forced on her by Jabba the Hutt.

Gowan reacted instantly. He arose and went to her, beaming in pleasure, speaking effusively:

"My dear! You look positively lovely." He put out his hands toward her. She took them, looking pleased by the compliment.

"Do you really think so?" she asked. "It's seldom I get the chance to dress like this."

"Of course, of course!" He led her into the room like a courtier at a ball, "So much more becoming to a woman of your beauty and status than that shapeless, shabby, military garb."

Han was still just taking her in. She stopped as she noted him. Her smile faded. She dropped Gowan's hands and turned toward him, her hands going to her hips.

"What's wrong with you?" she demanded.

"Huh?" said an off-guard Han. "Oh...ah... nothing! No. It's... it's great!"

Gowan spoke up proddingly. "I *believe* that the general came to inform us of something. Am I right, General?"

"Oh, right," said Han, brought back to his purpose there "I came to tell you I've locked in the destination coordinates. We're all set. Once we get out past the Foss Point beacon we'll make the jump to lightspeed."

"And how long to the rendezvous from there?" Leia asked.

"About thirty-six hours," he told her.

"We'd best get back to our studies then," said Gowan to her. "We've got to have determined our preliminary responses to any counter demands the Imperial team might possibly make. Senator Valladian is a most wily negotiator.

"He'll surely give us no concessions he doesn't have to," Leia agreed. "We can't afford not to be fully prepared."

"Good. That is..." he met her gaze with a probing one, "...unless, you'd rather work in my quarters. It would be more..." he glanced around at Han, "...private there."

She also glanced to Solo, noting his eyes narrowing at this suggestion.

"Here will be fine," she told Gowan.

He shrugged and smiled. "I tried," he said and went out of the room.

Alone now, Leia looked to Han, and he looked to her. They stood apart for a few moments, he in open appraisal, she in clear discomfort under the scrutiny.

"Will you please tell me what's wrong?" she finally asked earnestly.

"Well, I don't exactly know," he said in a musing tone, walking around her to get a view from all angles. "I mean, I've seen you in a real gown before. I've just never seen you in anything quite this fine."

"It's not so fine as that," she protested. "It's what I have to wear as a person of state. I'm an ambassador now. I represent you and our whole cause."

He moved in closer and fingered the rich cloth of her sleeve. He looked up into her face, noting the soft blush in the cheeks, the subtly reddened lips, the accentuating highlights around the eyes.

"Are you wearing makeup?" he asked accusingly.

"Of course I am," she said sharply. "Why not? I am also a woman. I know you men have forgotten."

She turned away to stand by the table where the pieces from Gowan's game sat frozen in their last positions. In an irritated gesture she poked at a bulbous, hippo-like piece. The creature stomped forward to crush a hapless, weasel-like pawn. The poor piece lay flattened.

Han stepped up to the table across from her.

"Of course we remember you're a woman, Leia. Especially me. I'm just not sure you're the same one I know."

He pushed a three horned, rhinoish beast forward. It skewered into her creature's bulging side with its long front horn. The punctured hippo-like piece deflated like a balloon.

"Why are you acting this way?" she said with frustration. This time her finger's push sent a dragonlike beast in to scorch the rhinoish one to cinders with a plume of blazing breath. "You've been angry with me since we started this mission."

"Oh, well, sorry!" He sent a massive gorilla-like piece to seize and strangle the dragon, tying its long neck into a bow knot. "Didn't mean to get you all roused up, Princess."

"And that name," she said. "Before all this you hadn't called me that in a long time."

"Well, that's what you are, isn't it?" he said bluntly. "I mean, that's what all this comes down to, doesn't it? A princess... and a guy like me..."

"I'm not a princess," she told him with some heat. My parents, my planet, all my own people are gone. Now I'm just Leia."

He shook his head. “No. You’re still a part of that old ruling class. You always will be. And you should be too,” he admitted grudgingly. “It’s important now. They need you. But me? Well, I’m like Luke said he was—just a simple, backwards guy, a soldier-of-fortune who got his money any way he could and his learning by hard knocks. How could I even think there’d be anything between us? You’re better off with a guy like Gowan.”

“Gowan?” she said, clearly jolted by the suggestion. “But...”

“C’mon, Princess,” he scoffed. “Don’t say you haven’t thought of it. You two fit in together like two spitz spores in a pod. I’ve seen him look at you. I’ve seen you look back, too.”

“How can you say that?” she cried, now in outrage. “You know that the only feelings I have are for you!” A finger jabbed in a long serpent piece to encoil the gorilla and squeeze it to oblivion.

“Look here, you and me have been through a lot together,” he returned. “We’ve helped each other out, leaned on each other when things were desperate. We had to. But you don’t have to confuse that with love.”

He prodded a last, scorpion-like piece forward to drive its sting through the flat head of the serpent. As the snake thrashed in its death throes, he started to turn from the table.

“Wait,” she said, an urgency replacing the ire in her tone. “Things have moved fast. There’ve been such changes. My feelings about… about *things* may be confused, but...”

A throat clearing sound brought them looking around to see Gowan returning.

“I was going to save the game for later,” he said, eyeing the devastation on the game board, “but I see someone’s finished it.” He looked to them, adding pointedly, “I certainly hope someone won.”

He sat down at the table between them.

"Very well then. All ready, Leia," he said briskly, looking up to her. He glanced to Han. "Thank you, General," he added, a cavalierly dismissing note in his voice, "but, if you don't mind, we really have to work. You can go about your duties."

Han looked from Gowan to her. "Is that right, Leia?" he asked. "Do you and he have to work now?"

"There's no choice," she said reasoningly. "We have to have everything ready. It's important... to all of us. You said so yourself."

He looked from her to a smugly grinning Gowan. "Yeah," he said in a conceding way. "I guess I did."

He turned, and stalked off toward the cockpit.

"Han!" Leia called after him, feeling as if something important was getting away from her here.

He hesitated an instant at the hatchway, but then went on, out of sight.

"Never mind about him," said Gowan dismissingly. He took hold of her hand. "He has his task and we have ours." He tugged her down beside him at the table. "Now, let's plan."

Forward, in the cockpit, Han Solo was grousing aloud to the Wookiee.

"Curse that greasy Gowan, Chewie! If I've got to live with him 'til..."

He stopped short, staring ahead. It was the golden figure of C-3PO who sat in his pilot's seat, eyes fixed on the ship's instruments.

"Chewie? What is *he* doing here?" Han asked the Wookiee.

His hairy first-mate only shrugged and snorted his ignorance.

"I am merely examining the ship's workings to see that all is correct," the droid casually supplied.

"Really? Well, I thought that was *my* job here. I don't want you changing things."

"As polite as usual," Threepio said in a voice colored by just the faintest sarcastic tinge. He took his time in rising from the seat and turned to face Solo.

"Don't your diplomat folk below need you?" Han said. "Why don't you go down and interrupt their little head-to-head?"

"I'm certain that when they have need of my skills, they will request them," the protocol droid replied.

"Well, look then, if you're bored, I can find something for you to do."

"Some menial and grubby little task too, no doubt," Threepio said. "Well, I'm afraid there will be no more of that."

"Oh, really?" said Han. "And why not?"

"Our relationship has changed," the droid told him in a brusque, lecturing tone. "I am no longer going to play your slave or servant. My service is now to Princess Leia and this mission only. I am much too intelligent and valuable to be utilized otherwise. I will thank you to consider that factor from this point on."

With this he pushed past Han and marched out of the cockpit.

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Han, looking after him. "You think you know your comrades..."

The Wookiee nodded and made a low, rumbling sound of commiseration.

Han moved to his seat and plopped himself down into it with a certain weariness.

"I don't know, Chewy," he said in a perplexed way. "Luke, Leia, and now him." He shook his head. "Things are changing so fast, I don't know who *anybody* is anymore."

The Wookiee made a growl of protest at this, and Han quickly gave him a smile.

"Sorry. I meant 'except for you', old pal," he assured.

Far off the Falcon's starboard bow a small planet marked by high, rough pinnacles of rock slipped into view from the background of stars.

"Tory Point," Han announced, sitting forward and taking hold of the controls. "Get ready for a course change and a jump to lightspeed. We'll be doing a bit of fancy flyin' for a while now." He grinned. "This should be fun!"

As the Wookie moved smartly to adjust controls, Han slammed the levers forward. The Millennium Falcon came about and snapped ahead to full speed, flashing away across the sea of space to slash a streaked trail of silver-white.

In only moments the ship had shrunk to a dot of light, leaving only the empty vista of blackness and stars.

The night sky above the cliffs was ablaze with the thick scattering of scintillating stars.

The only other light came from the small gold cone sent up by a small but cheerfully glowing fire. Its light faintly revealed the huddled mass of Obi Wan Kenobi's house not far away.

Close to the fire sat Luke and R2-D2. The droid was using its articulated arm to push more sticks into the blaze and provide a more suitable light for its intent comrade.

Luke sat across the fire from his mechanical companion staring searchingly at the milk-crystal bowl which he held in his hands. He held the thing up, turning it this way and that, studying the manner

in which the golden glow played in rainbows of iridescent color against its smooth, curved outsides.

A definite frustration was revealed in the young man's frowning expression. He sighed aloud, drawing the droid's gleaming eye to him.

It squealed out in an inquiring way.

"No. Nothing yet, Artoo," Luke answered it. He turned the hollow globe over to examine the bottom. "There isn't any kind of blemish, cut, or crack on it. The glass is perfect."

The droid squeaked and tootled again.

"Inside?" Luke translated. He turned the sphere around, feeling it over carefully with his hands. "No," he said in exasperation. "No way to open it, either." He held the enigmatic object up to the light again. "I just don't understand, Artoo. Ben said that the key to Angorathea could be found in this thing. But he didn't give me any idea what it was, or even a clue how to find it. So how did he think…"

He stopped abruptly, a light of realization sweeping the shadows of bafflement from his face.

"Wait a minute, Artoo," he said with excitement. "This is part of it too. The test of a true Jedi!"

He knew that this had to be it. If the power of the Force truly was with him, he ought to be able to get the secret out of this thing when no one else could. Obi Wan certainly wouldn't have left a key so important around for just anyone to find.

He gazed at the sphere hard again for some moments in new consideration. His feelings told him there was only one means to his finding the truth: he was going to have to concentrate his powers on the sphere.

He looked around for an appropriate spot, then moved back a bit and set the sphere down on a level place between himself and the fire. He sat cross-legged before it, hands upon knees, and fixed his gaze on it intently. His face drew into taut lines as he focused himself.

He had to remember what Yoda had taught him about control. He had to draw upon the energy—reach out—feel his connection to this thing. The power of the Force was with him. He could not doubt that. The power was in him… *in him*… *in him*…

As this litany ran on through his thoughts, he put his whole mind and will to the task. His body tensed, seemed to vibrate slightly with his focusing power. The droid watched with a seeming concentration of its own, giving a small, worried whine.

The sphere at first was lit only by the reflection of the firelight. But soon a luminescence began to rise within it, overcoming the gold glow until it shone out in the dark like a silver moon. Clearly Luke was having an effect on it.

He lifted his hands from his knees, stretching them out to it in a gesture that seemed both of welcome and summons. In a firm, clear voice he spoke out his request:

"Show me the Heart of the Jedi!"

The glowing sphere swelled upward and outward, blooming into a huge ball filling the space between Luke and the fire, looming high over him. The startled droid squealed in alarm and jerked away, lifting its eye to stare upward.

Unaffected himself, Luke calmly stared into the light. He watched as it altered from a solid glow to a swirling translucence. He watched as, within the billows, blue-silver clouds coalesced and then thinned, showing a globe's solid surface below. Here, vast glinting areas of a deep blue appeared, separated by several smaller areas of

mottled browns and greens. Some inner knowledge told him what this brilliant object he gazed on truly was.

"Angorathea!" Luke breathed.

Then a new structure appeared atop the pattern of seas and continents. It was a grid work of uncountable fine threads, running here and there to various points, connecting, linking, crossing, intertwining in a complex woven fabric that seemed to bind all into a whole tapestry. And many threads shot away from it into the surrounding space, as if stretching out to touch other worlds.

"It's the lines of energy!" said Luke. "I can see them!"

In one ocean section near an isle on the fringe of a ragged continent, a particularly large number of the energy lines fanned out from a single point. It was an odd concentration to see in a sector so empty otherwise. And the point of light was singular too. It was the clear, brilliant red of a blazing ruby, and the glow pulsed brighter with the slow, steady rhythm of a beating heart.

Elation filled Luke as he stared at the spot.

"Artoo," he called, "do you see the bright red point?"

The droid whistled an affirmative.

"Good. From my memory of the charts of that part of space, those larger planets nearest to it must be Erinn and Albaan. You've flown out farther than I've explored. Can you identify that spot? Can you tell me exactly where it is?"

There was a pause as the droid considered, its electronic mind swiftly shuffling through thousands of images of space seen from multiple angles.

Soon it squeaked and tootled excitedly.

"You have seen a planet out there?" Luke translated with a like excitement. "A very small one?"

It tweeted affirmative.

"Could you guide me there?" Luke asked.

The droid gave an assuring beep.

With that, Luke relaxed his concentration. His tension eased. As it did, the light faded, and the glowing globe shrank down to become only a milk-crystal sphere again.

He picked it up, eying it in satisfaction.

"Well, we've got it now," he said with an air of triumph. "The Ice Sea. That's where we have to go."

The droid made a low gurgling noise that most distinctly conveyed a deep concern.

"Yes, I know, Artoo," Luke answered, realizing he hadn't been considering his companion. "It's a long way, and likely dangerous."

Luke considered their little spacecraft perched nearby and shook his head.

"The problem is that X-wing of ours isn't ideal for long trips. And there's no backup hyperdrive if things go wrong. We need something better."

He looked out into the darkness, considering the options. But he already knew the only answer. If they had to find a stouter ship, there was just one decent place in that part of the quadrant to look, no matter how dangerous.

It was that spaceport of outcast galactic wrongdoers and rascals known as Mos Eisley!

CHAPTER 13

Above the sterile and pockmarked face of a small, grey moon, a single Imperial Star Destroyer glided in its synchronous orbit.

From a tiny supply base on the surface directly below, a squadron of twelve TIE fighters screamed upward, headed for the battleship. There a score of fighters already hovered close to the big vessel—like gnats about a dozing greelor—awaiting their turn to enter the underside landing bay.

High Admiral Tharkus stood at the bow window of the ship's main bridge, hands clasped behind him, watching the swarming TIE fighters. Next to him stood the Imperial general named Kantos. Behind them the bridge area was filled with activity as dozens of crewmen and officers readied the Star Destroyer to sail.

One of those officers—a spare, stiff, and birdlike man of pinched features—checked the sensor data on a display screen, nodded, and strutted over to the two.

"High Admiral Tharkus," the man addressed in a cold, crisp way, "the last of the fighters have left the surface. We will have all squadrons aboard within the hour."

Tharkus turned to him. "Very good, Captain Vaskor," he said with approval. "How many will that be, then?"

"A double compliment, Sir. Four full squadrons, just as you ordered."

"Excellent. And has all the other additional equipment I requested been brought aboard as well?"

"Yes, Sir. We should be fully prepared to meet any environmental contingency. But, it is a bit crowded aboard, sir, with all the extra machines and men."

"You are resourceful, Captain," Tharkus told him. "I'm quite certain you will make do. Now, there's no question that we can reach our destination with the utmost speed?"

"None, Sir. This Victory II-class vessel has been retrofitted with the best hyperspace capabilities in the fleet. We can jump as soon as we have the coordinates from this *special agent* of yours."

"Excellent," the high-admiral said with satisfaction. "Then just be ready to initiate a departure immediately upon our receiving the coded transmission. I expect it at any time."

The man bowed and began to turn away. But then he hesitated. "Ah... High Admiral," he said, "forgive my boldness, but I *am* the captain of this ship, and this is highly irregular. Might I ask just what all of it is for?"

"I am afraid you will have to perform your duties in ignorance of that," Tharkus replied. "This endeavor is most secret. The more who know, the greater the danger. Do you understand, Captain?"

The man drew himself up rigidly. "Of course, Sir. I'll ask nothing further." He snapped a salute, turned, and marched away.

"A most disciplined officer," remarked Kantos, looking after him.

"A bit unimaginative," said Tharkus, "but highly trained and completely loyal—the characteristics I have most need of now."

"He has a point about the overcrowding," said the General. "My stormtroopers are squeezed into very tight quarters here. Why aren't you making use of your larger command ship, or your whole flotilla for that matter?"

"For the same reason we're hiding on this obscure moon, loading our forces by stealth," Tharkus explained. "I said no lie when I told our captain that this was dangerous. Too many elements are

arrayed against us. Were we to be caught, we would surely be condemned. None others but ourselves must know the whole truth of what we mean to do."

"And all these men we lead into jeopardy?"

"They are like the captain—handpicked by me and obedient. They would die for me without question."

"Let us hope that they won't need to," Kantos said fervently. He considered, then added musingly. "But, you realize, Tharkus, that this secrecy gives you another advantage as well."

Tharkus frowned in puzzlement. "What do you mean?"

"Consider it. If we do find a source of the Force's power and can control it, why then you alone might..."

"...rule the galaxy?" Tharkus finished in a voice filled with shock at the very idea. "Kantos, you misjudge my personal ambitions in this." His voice took on a noble tone. "I seek only to restore the strength of our Empire and see the vile rebel conspiracy destroyed."

"But the Force..." began Kantos.

Tharkus cut him off. "I despise the Jedi and everything they represent," he spat out venomously. "It is a religion of dreamers, of misfits who scorn social order. Belief in its idyllic virtues brings on weakness and sloth. It's a drug that destroys the need to act, to use hands, will, and brute strength," he clasped one hand into a tight fist and shook it, "to seize life tight and bend it to our needs. Better that it be wiped out altogether than that we risk infection from the sickness by touching it ourselves."

Kantos listened to the tirade, but remained unconvinced.

"Still," he persisted in a scheming way, "if a man of your own strength and will could master this power, it might be different. You said yourself that the Emperor abused it, using it to his own ends.

But if it were used for the good of the whole Empire, under the military's control, why..."

This voicing of his thoughts was interrupted by the approach of Lieutenant Voss, the high-admiral's aide.

"The protocol droid's transmission of the coordinates has been received, Sir," he reported to Tharkus. "We are ready to proceed."

"Good, Lieutenant. Pass the necessary information to the captain. Tell him we will cast off immediately after the last fighter is aboard. Oh, and, Voss, have you had any new word on young Skywalker?"

"I had a report not long ago. But there's no change, Sir. He is still making his way to the Mos Eisely Spaceport."

Young Jedi and droid came into the outskirts of the sprawling port town on striding foot and rolling wheels.

As they reached the first buildings, Luke made certain that his hood was up about his face and that the long cloak was adjusted around him to hide his weapons. Beside him R2-D2 rolled bumpily along over the neglected, potholed road, chirping in low, sharp undertone as if it were grumbling to itself.

"Quit complaining, Artoo," Luke said amiably. "I know it was a long walk, but we couldn't bring the X-wing here. I told you there were still some Imperial garrison troopers around. Look over there."

A small patrol of the white-armored soldiers was lounging out before a small tavern's door, conversing in bored tones. Their weapons were leaned against the cracked stucco of the building's outer wall, and some of the troopers even had their helmets off.

As the man and droid went by, none moved to question or intercept them. A couple of the men glanced around toward them, but without any sign of more than mild curiosity.

"They sure don't seem on alert," Luke softly commented once they were safely by.

R2-D2 beeped a response.

"Yes, I know there's supposed to be a truce," Luke translated, "but we can't take any chances. We're on our own here."

The little droid trilled out a question.

"Yes, I want it that way. And, no, I'm not going to get any help. I've got to do this alone."

It squeaked in indignation at that.

"All right, Artoo," said Luke soothingly. "I meant 'alone except for you.'"

Luke looked around him thoughtfully as they moved further into the town. "The trick is, getting a ship without any money. I've got a few hundred credits, but not enough for..."

He stopped as they entered the heart of the city and his eye lit on the big, dirty-white dome of the port's largest saloon, the Mos Eisley Cantina.

"Hmmm," he mused. "Artoo, didn't Han tell us that he won the Falcon from Lando Calrissian in a card game?"

The droid answered with a flurry of shrill noises which sounded most distinctively doubtful. Luke looked around at it in a hurt way.

"What do you mean? I'm as good a card player as Han," he said defensively. "And I don't need to use the Force to cheat, either. Come on."

He marched determinedly up to the cantina's wide, main doors, Artoo rolling behind. The droid stopped there, whistling worriedly.

"Oh, right," said Luke. "Droids aren't allowed. Well, just wait here. I should be back soon."

It twittered and squeaked some more.

"No," he replied. "I'm not afraid to go in there alone. Nobody here knows me. I'll be safe."

It persistently beeped more in an unconvinced tone.

"No, I'm not trying to prove anything," Luke said, amused. "Okay, so I did almost get killed here once. But that was a long time ago. You know I don't need a Ben or a Han to bail me out anymore."

He patted it assuredly on the domed head, turned, put on a stern and most confident look, and strode in through the doors.

Down a wide flight of stairs beyond he entered an oval, half-lit den, its stagnant air thick with the aroma of stale liquor and a blue-white smoke haze. Within the curved length of bar at its center worked a fat, red-faced, and surly looking attendant, serving drinks to the patrons surrounding him.

There were few of these just now. A dozen beings of various types stood at the bar, a dozen more were scattered amongst the tables around it. They were making the best of entertaining themselves amidst a much subdued atmosphere. There was no band, no music, no boisterous talk or sign of gaiety. Most sat morosely over glasses or puffed drowsily on the stems of fuming hookah pipes. A few conversed in a dull and sullen manner.

Luke stopped at the base of the stairs to look around. None of the patrons gave him more than a casual return glance. His scanning gaze passed across the room to focus on a far corner. Here several beings sat about a larger, hexagon-shaped table. Each of the table's

six sides was fitted with the small, hooded viewscreen of a computerized card-playing device. In the table's center rose the squat pagoda of the game's machinery.

Luke made his way to the table. Four of its six well-worn chairs were taken. A half-fill mug of a thick, greenish fluid sat before a fifth.

"Got an extra seat?" Luke inquired.

A being whose grey, wet-skinned face was rimmed by a halo of writhing tentacles raised pop-eyes to him.

"You wish to play?" it asked in a low, liquid sounding voice.

"I'd like to sit in for a few hands, if you don't mind."

The one to the right of the two empty seats—a heavy, barrel-chested man sporting a bushy mustache and a dour disposition—gestured to the spot beside him with a stubby hand and rumbled: "Alluz roomfur fresh blood."

The one next to him—a cadaverous, red-skinned Devaronian—giggled nervously at this, revealing the sharp-pointed teeth of a carnivore.

Luke sat down, looking around at the others. Besides the three, a fourth being eyed him somewhat timidly from the chair on the opposite side. This one was a frail, deer-like creature with little antler buds, nervously twitching nose, and big, dark, moist eyes.

When the young Jedi made no immediate move, the mustached man grew impatient.

"Well?" he grumbled. "Whydntcha putchur money in? Aintcha ever played before?"

"Oh, sorry," Luke said. He looked over the gaming machine. It had clearly seen a great deal of wear. The hoods shielding the individual viewscreens were badly battered. The central playing

computer showed a few dents of its own, and the grey metal rim around the wide mouth of its feed slot was worn shiny from years of money being shoved through.

He reached into his robe to pull a stack of flat credit plaques from a pocket. He leaned forward and fed them one-by-one into the machine's maw. It seemed to gulp and smack electronically as it swallowed each piece. A readout of the ingested cash showed on the tote board encircling its top.

The tentacled being eyed the number and commented wetly: "Six hundred and fifty. Pretty light. Barely a minimum stake for this game."

"It'll get bigger," Luke answered breezily. "So, are we ready to play?"

"Juz' waitin' on one more," the mustached one said. "Here he is. Hey, Ponda!"

A figure moved up beside Luke and plumped heavily down into the seat next to him. The young Jedi glanced toward the newcomer and his eye first fell on the glinting metal of a mechanical arm.

It was an artificial limb of cheap and crude construction. The metal skeleton and wire tendons were uncovered by bioflesh, and the stiff, knobby joints of the sharp-taloned fingers made its hand look more like a claw.

Luke's gaze lifted from the arm to its owner's face, so close to his own and turned toward him. The young Jedi managed not to register any shock at what he saw.

It was the walrus-like face of an Aqualish. A pair of yellowed, inward-turned tusks protruded from a wide, bristled snout. The skin was smooth and shiny, the eyes large and liquid black.

Those eyes were now fixed searchingly upon Luke.

"Hey," the being named Ponda grunted in a guttural voice, "don't I know you?"

Luke looked him squarely in the eyes and said in a careless way, "I've been around before."

The Aqualish brought up a good left hand and rubbed the forearm of his metal limb. "I'm sure I've met you," he said musingly. "What's your name?"

"You really don't want to know it," Luke told him with more than a little truth. "I wouldn't want to scare anyone."

"Scare? You?" The man barked a laugh, then leaned closer. "Listen pup, my own partner's bought a death sentence on twelve systems, and he's not so mean as me. Why, I'm not scared of..."

"Oh, shaddup, willya?" the mustached man told him. He looked to Luke. "Sorry, stranger, he sezzat to everyone. Big man. Big braggin' sinz he teamed up with that quack Evazan. But allzits boughtim'z trouble." He spoke across Luke to the one-armed being. "Look, the kidz got money. Thazall we care about. Maybe youcun finally win enough to getta dezent bio-arm. So lez play!"

The Aqualish glared around at the rest of the players, then sat back, curtly nodding his assent.

"All right, then," the tentacled one said. "Computer, deal!"

The machine clucked and burbled to life. It made a long, fluttering sound, as if real pasteboards were being shuffled inside, and then the first of the card symbols popped into view on the players' screens.

Luke studied them intently. Neither he nor any of the others gave note to a small, baldish, nondescript man who ambled in and went up to the bar.

The newcomer ordered a drink and then stood there quietly, sipping and looking about with apparent disinterest. But his eyes went most often to the card came proceeding at the table, fixing largely on Luke.

The gaming computer gave a derogatory-sounding bleat, and a red light flashed on Luke's view screen.

Luke shook his head in chagrin as the row of card symbols faded. He looked up at the central tote board. The figure indicating the amount of his credits grew considerably smaller.

"Ya'only got two hunnnerd left," the mustached man commented. "You're gettin' clozeta tapped out."

"It'll get better," Luke answered, but with somewhat less confidence than before.

"Not unless you learn to bluff better than that," the tentacled one said. "Your human faces are all alike. So open, they cannot hide anything."

"We'll see," said Luke. "Deal again."

The computer complied. Luke watched as the symbols for the dealt cards flashed up on his screen. One, two, three card symbols, all unlike. A forth. A fifth. And suddenly, he had two pairs.

"I'll bet fifty," the metal-armed Aqualish said.

The bet went around once, and all of them stayed in. With some confidence, Ponda upped fifty more. Luke saw him, as did the Mustached one and the cadaverous Devaronian. The fawn-like creature shook its head nervously and dropped out.

The bet came to Tentacles. "I'll see that fifty," he announced, "and I'll raise one hundred more."

The Aqualish accepted, passing the bet to Luke. The young man considered his hand again, then nodded. "All right. I'll see that too."

But both the Mustached man and the Devaronian found it too rich and pulled out. Only three were left.

"Looks like it's up to me," Tentacles said. He fixed his pop-eyes right on Luke and said with a certain cruel glee: "I'll raise five hundred more."

"I'm finished," the metal-armed Ponda declared gruffly, sitting back.

Luke met the slimy creature's gaze. "You know I haven't got anything left."

"Yes. Too bad," the other oozed in a tone of phony sympathy while its tentacles jiggled in delight. "You are through either way: not enough to see me and stay in the hand; nothing left to play on with if you fold. You wish to quit now?"

"No," Luke said with force. He considered, then boldly made the commitment: "Look, I've got something else. A good droid. An R2 unit. It's in prime condition. I could put up that."

The tentacled one sniffed. "An astromech droid? I wouldn't give more than a thousand for such a thing. No matter how prime."

"Done!" Luke accepted quickly. "Then I'll put up my droid against you. Five hundred to see you, and another five on top of that!"

There were some gasps of surprise around the table.

"Bet a thouzzand?" the mustached one said. "You muztave some cardz boy!"

"No," said the tentacled one with certainty. He leaned forward and stared intently at Luke's face. "He's bluffing. He must be!"

Straight-faced, Luke stared right back into the bulging eyes. In a calm voice filled with confidence, he said slowly: "It's up to you to find out now, isn't it? All you have to do is call."

The creature tried to meet his eyes defiantly for a long moment. But a glint of uncertainty dawned in the popping orbs, and it grew brighter as Luke's return stare didn't waver. Finally the being's gaze faltered, dropping down.

"No," Tentacles said in a beaten tone. "I don't think I will."

He folded.

Luke gave a small, inaudible sigh of relief. He relaxed.

"Well," he said amiably, "I thank you all very much, but I think that I'd better quit while I'm at least a little ahead."

"Your gonna leave after winning a pot like that?" a dismayed Ponda asked.

"It hardly seems fair," the cadaverous one said in a sepulchral voice.

The fawnish one said nothing, looking only the more timorous.

"Sorry," Luke told them. "I've already taken chances enough. I need to put these winnings to good use. Computer, cash me in."

A dispenser at the bottom of the central machine began disgorging his credits into a tray. He scooped out the plaques, stacked them, and began shoving them into pockets under his cloak.

"I have to know," the defeated Tentacles said as Luke worked. "What was in your hand?"

"Two pairs."

"Damn," the being said with chagrin, tentacles drooping. "I had three of a kind. I am a fool. Humans can bluff after all."

"Don't feel too bad," Luke told him consolingly. "I really just got lucky."

He pulled the last credits together, shoving the packet into a bulging tunic pocket. As he did so, the robe fell aside. The metal-armed being beside him caught a glimpse of the lightsaber dangling on his belt.

A light dawned in the liquid black eyes.

With the last of the money put away, Luke said, "I thank you gentlemen," and pushed his chair back to rise.

But the metal claw suddenly clamped down over his left arm, pinning it as the sharp talons drove deep into the tabletop.

Luke looked up into the face of the Aqualish who had risen to stand crouched over him. His good hand rested on the butt of a blaster holstered on his left hip.

"I know you now!" Ponda snarled. "You're going to die!"

CHAPTER 14

"Wait a minute," Luke said, maintaining his poise without a missed beat, "Just what do you mean?"

"I mean that you're the one who cut my arm off!" Ponda Baba grated out through clenched teeth. "In a fight four years ago!"

"And, if I am?"

"I've been waiting a long time to get even for that," the other said. "You know how long it took me to learn to shoot with my left hand?"

"Then I'd think you'd want to be careful not to lose that one too," Luke told him, the threat clear in his voice. "Now, please, just back away."

"Why you...!" Ponda bellowed in rage, yanking out his blaster.

But before it could clear the holster, Luke had acted. He jerked up from his seat, driving his head hard into the other's face.

Ponda grunted in pain and staggered backward, his metal claw coming free of Luke's arm. He hit a chair and toppled heavily to the floor.

The Jedi was up in an instant, one hand darting into his robe to seize the lightsaber's hilt.

On Luke's other side, the mustached man sat frozen in shock. The Devaronian and Tentacles likewise stayed put. But across the table, the fawn-like one made its own play. In a quick, agile move it jumped up in its seat, one slender arm rising to lift an enormous ax into view above the table top.

Doe-y eyes gleaming cruelly, little mouth twisted in a snarl, it brought the weapon higher to strike.

Luke's hand whipped the lightsaber free of the cloak. He switched it around and the bright blade flashed out.

The ax swung up to sweep at Luke as he swung his glowing sword around toward it. The Jedi warrior's move was an instant faster.

The blade's tip slammed across the center of the long ax handle, raising a shower of splinters as it sliced the wood through. The energy of the blade sizzled along the weapon and into the creature, slamming it back down in its seat, stunned.

The metal-armed Ponda had now recovered and was starting to get up. Luke leaped away from the table to stand over him. The bright blade hung just inches above the shoulder of his good arm, clearly threatening.

"Do you still want to try it?" Luke asked in a chill voice.

The being looked from the glowing beam up to Luke's determined face. His hand released the blaster and it dropped to the floor.

"Good choice," said Luke.

He kicked the weapon away and stepped past Ponda into an open area of floor, pivoting slowly to face the others in the bar, swinging the lightsaber to keep any other prospective attackers at bay.

"Now, I intend to leave here with no more trouble," he told them. "So if everyone will just..."

"Hey there! You!" a voice called from the main doors.

He looked around to it to see a half dozen stormtroopers rushing through the entranceway. The loud clicks from their blaster rifles told him the weapons were being powered up for action.

He looked about him for escape. At the back of the drinking hall he spied an arched opening with kegs stacked at either side. He

turned and rushed for it. The troopers started across the floor after him, roughly shoving patrons aside.

Luke went through the archway, finding himself in a crammed storeroom. A narrow avenue through its piled crates and kegs led to a closed rear door. He moved to it. The metal panel was fitted with a bolt and a heavy padlock. He lifted the lightsaber and made a slash at the lock. The blade struck sparks from the metal and cut deep.

But the lock stayed fastened.

The first troopers reached the archway from the bar. But as one headed through it, the high stack of kegs at one side suddenly toppled. Some of them knocked him down, where two troopers tripped over him. Others rolled off, bowling two more men down.

The little, nondescript, balding man who had shoved the kegs over quickly sidled away and slunk toward the front of the bar in the confusion he had caused.

Meantime Luke lifted his blade to strike at the padlock.

The one trooper still on his feet clambered over his struggling fellows and got through the door.

Luke slashed down hard. The lock came free. He threw the bolt and wrenched the door open. The street lay beyond.

The trooper raised his rifle and aimed.

Luke leaped forward as the man fired. The bolt exploded against the door jamb as he vanished through it, tearing a ragged hole.

Outside, Luke was running, angling left to pelt at full speed back around the building to its front.

He paused as he neared the front, peering past the last curve of wall to the main doors. There were no troopers posted there, no one at all about except for the still-waiting droid.

Angry shouts from behind him prompted him to move on quickly again. He ran around past, then away from the saloon, shouting back to the droid:

"Come on, Artoo. Follow me!"

The little droid obeyed as well as it could, immediately rolling off after him at top speed.

Luke led it through the town market place and into the closest side street, staying well ahead of it as he sprinted down the narrow avenue and took a turn at the first crossroads.

The droid rolled to the crossing, turned, but then stopped as its eye took in an empty street ahead. Nothing was visible there but the monotonous domed structures lining the way close on either side.

Artoo moved forward slowly, head swiveling nervously in search of its suddenly vanished master. It gave a little whimper of distress.

From the rounded top of its head the tiny sensor dish lifted on its extendable rod and began to rotate as the droid rolled slowly ahead. But when Artoo passed a narrow, dark alley between two structures, two hands shot out to grab it and haul it back out of sight.

It squealed in alarm, but then its head swiveled around and it saw its assailant.

It was Luke. The droid began to rock back and forth and squeak in its joy.

"Quiet, Artoo!" Luke said sharply, rapping it on the head.

It went instantly still. Luke warily peered out past it, around the corner into the street. There was no sign of stormtroopers.

"Looks like we lost them for now, Artoo," he said. He looked ruefully at the still glowing lightsaber. "Too bad they all saw this." He snapped it off and hung it back away under his robe. "They'll

probably be looking for me now. We'll have to get off Tatooine fast. Come on."

He stepped out into the street again and looked around. With Artoo close behind he moved down to the next crossroads. Here he stopped to examine the symbols painted on the walls at each corner.

"I know the dealer we have to go to," Luke said as he considered the street signs. "A Vuvrian named Wioslea. I sold my land speeder to her. She's got all kinds of used ships. Cheap ones too. If I can just figure directions from here."

While he mused over this, the waiting Artoo idly panned the scene. The lens stopped as it fell upon a most mangy, cat-like creature of matted orange fur sitting close by, staring at them.

The droid beeped a questioning message to Luke.

"Eh? What, Artoo?" he said, looking around from the signs to the watching feline. "That? Just some stray. Probably after a handout. Never mind it. I think I've got the way. Let's go."

He started away up a cross-street, the droid falling in beside him. It made another questioning series of noises as they went.

"Yes, I think I'll have enough to buy something, Artoo," he replied. "If I do some sharp bargaining, that is. I didn't do as well as I hoped, but at least I doubled my money.

It gave an incredulous whistle.

"No, I didn't cheat for it," Luke said. "I told you I wouldn't. But if I had, you really shouldn't have minded Artoo... considering I bet you."

A torrent of outraged tweets and squawks poured from it as they went on, fading way as they proceeded down the avenue.

The scruffy orange cat sat waiting where it was, staring after them with bright green eyes until they were a safe distance ahead.

Only then did it follow after them, slinking along from shadow to shadow to stay well out of sight.

The Millennium Falcon and its escorting fighters came out of their light speed corridor within close proximity of a planet.

Leia and Gowan were up into the cockpit at once to peer curiously out over the heads of Han and Chewie as they flew in toward the bleak-looking, grey-brown sphere.

The details of it increased as they drew nearer, but that did little to alter a first impression of the world's dismalness.

It seemed an utterly stark planet of rock, devoid of any sign of vegetation or water. Not even a dust storm disturbed the barren scene, nor the faintest wisps of an atmosphere obscured the view. The only feature breaking the monotonous wastes was what seemed to be huge volcanic cones thrusting up miles above the surface, widely scattered and irregularly spaced.

"That?" Leia said in disbelief to Han. "You want us to meet there?"

"You bet, Princess," he told her assuredly. "The planet Pellkadarr. Best place possible."

She shook her head in doubt. "I don't know. I wish you'd told me something about it. *Anything* about it."

"Sorry," he said. "Just your Senator Valladian and me. I transmitted the directions directly to him over his private channel. I figured the fewer who knew anything the better. He agreed."

"All right," she also agreed grudgingly. "That was probably wise." But at his responding smirk, she added sharply, "Just don't let it go to your head. I'll withhold my judgment until I see where this meeting's supposed to be." She looked out toward the planet again. "I

sure don't see any place down there for it. I don't see signs of any kind of life. I don't even see signs of any atmosphere."

"Yeah, that's what it looks like. Nothing readable from out here at all. A totally dead stone. That's the beauty of it." He grinned roguishly. "Just stick with me."

"Have we got another choice?" she asked.

"None at all. Better strap in."

As they sat down in the rear seats and fastened the restraints, Han got on his comlink to contact Gold Flight leader.

"Wedge?" he said, "we're going in now. Get your boys and just follow me. Oh," he added, "and better keep 'em bunched together good, okay?"

"Uh... yeah, sure Han," Wedge affirmed, but somewhat uncertainly.

"Right then," Han said to his passengers, "here we go!"

With that he sent the Falcon into a sharp descent toward the surface. The six fighters pulled into tight formation and followed close.

The surface seemed to come up rapidly as the ships fell toward it in full dive. And Solo showed no signs of slowing.

"What are you doing?" Leia demanded.

"Just relax," Han advised calmly. "Enjoy the ride."

Wedge's voice came crackling from the comm speaker: "Han, we're coming in kind of fast. Are you sure about this?"

"Just trust me," Han told him.

"I'm afraid I can't!" Gowan said in a voice rising with growing alarm. He looked white-faced to Leia. "Is he a madman?"

"Han, you're going too fast," Leia said sternly. "If you're pulling some childish kind of flyboy stunt, stop it! We could crash!"

"You're going to kill us!" Gowan cried.

Han laughed and just steered them on in. "Where's your guts, Princey?" he called back.

The rock surface swelled to fill the view ahead as they plunged to meet it.

Then, scant miles above the ground, with no time left to veer away, Solo altered their trajectory just slightly. Instead of smashing down, the Falcon dove into the open mouth atop of one of the peaks, the fighters close behind.

Darkness swallowed them. Han switched on the ship's forward landing lights, revealing a vertical tunnel, smooth-walled except for some faint, spiraling cuts.

"It's underground," Leia said to Han in disgust. "Why didn't you just tell us?"

"What fun would that have been?" he replied. "You enjoyed it, didn't you Gow?"

Leia looked to Gowan. The Prince of Galvoni III was panting, sweating, and extremely pale.

"It's all right," she soothed him. "Han was only trying to scare us."

"He succeeded quite well," Gowan gasped, shooting a hot glare at their pilot. "I really ought to strike you for that one, Solo."

"Try any time," Han cheerily offered. Then a point of light ahead, growing swiftly larger, caught his eye. "Look out, we're coming to the end..."

Falcon and X-wings shot out of the tunnel and into the open again. But this space, though quite vast, was still completely enclosed.

He turned the ship to sail it horizontally between a ceiling and floor over three miles apart. They now flew in what looked to be a cavern of immense proportions. It stretched away in every direction as far as could be seen, vanishing behind the curved wall of distance. And the view was unbroken save for columns of stone, themselves a mile thick, which thrust up here and there to support the ceiling.

Even with the size, there was something about the place that made it seem other than nature-made. The surfaces above and below were very smooth, marked only by shallow crisscrossing grooves, as if created by enormous excavating tools. And the huge columns were formed in a rough oval shape, as if they'd been crudely hewn out.

If the size of the place was astounding, its colors were more so. The floor and columns were mostly of grey rock, but the ceiling was composed of a quartz-like, translucent stone. It was striped through with sinuous streamers of warm pastels, looking like an aurora borealis frozen in ice.

"Where are we?" Leia asked.

"Under the outer crust," said Han. "Five miles down."

"If this place is so hidden," the Prince said with suspicion, "just how did you know about it, Solo?"

"Some smuggler buddies of mine found this place years ago," Han explained. "Figured it was perfect. Invisible and unknown."

"Have you any friends who aren't outlaws?" Gowan asked nastily.

"Just you, Prince boy," Solo returned. "Anyway, they set up an HQ here. Worked out of it for years. Then the Empire caught up with them. Wiped out most of their operation. The place was abandoned."

C-3PO came into the cockpit, glancing about. "Oh, have we arrived?" he inquired disinterestedly.

"Glad you could join us," Han told him. "Yeah, we're here."

The droid looked out at the scene. "Subterranean. Not very interesting, is it?" he said in a bored way.

"I think it is," Leia said, obviously impressed. "Where did it come from?"

"Eaten out I heard," Han said. "Found some fossils — *big* ones. Things like giant moles. I'm guessing these rocks release chemicals that make the air breathable in here, and the things went tunneling all through these layers to get it. None of 'em around now though. Must've died out centuries ago."

"That explains an atmosphere in here, but what about light?" she asked, looking out into the soft but sufficient illumination diffused evenly through the space.

Han shrugged. "Ask the Professor that one."

"I disapprove of your use of that nickname," the droid replied in a discernibly haughty way. "Still, as you have deferred to my superior knowledge, I will explain."

He put on a crisp, lecturing tone:

"The singular formation of silica-based substratum which forms the layer above us contains a high percentage of elements of an especially phosphoric variety. In such high concentrations as we encounter here, this produces a substantive illuminating effect upon the cavernous area below."

"Say again?" said Solo, looking back to the droid.

"To place it on your level of comprehension," Threepio said disdainly, "the rocks glow."

Irked by the tone, Han opened his mouth to reply, but a loud "gronk" from Chewie brought his attention back to the front window.

"There it is," he said, pointing ahead. "The base."

In the distance, a comparatively tiny huddle of buildings showed against the base of a roof pillar. Nearby it was the smoothed out circle of a landing pad. A single, Lambda-class shuttle craft sat there.

"Looks like your Imperial party beat us here," Han said. He got on the comm line. "Wedge? Why don't you take the boys out in a wide sweep around them. Be sure they're alone."

The X-wings obeyed, swinging out to scour the area far around while the Falcon circled the base at a safe distance.

"No one else we can see, Han," Wedge reported back.

"Okay," said Han. "I'll take the Falcon in. But keep the boys flying, okay? Keep a good lookout. I still don't trust them."

"Right," Wedge acknowledged.

Han glided the ship in. A reception party of the Imperials was visible, waiting by its own craft. As the Falcon settled to the ground in a last blast of repulsorlift power, this group strode forward, stopping midway between.

Leia peered out toward the group of robed and sashed men.

"All the ones there look like senators," she said. "No military around. And I'm fairly sure the silver-haired one is Senator Valladian."

"I'm still going out first to check," Han said. "Come on Chewie."

As they started to get up, Leia rose as well. "I'll go too."

"No," Han said firmly. "You're ambassador now, remember? Too valuable to take chances. Stay put."

He and the Wookiee moved to the cockpit door.

"No weapons, remember," Gowan called after them. "It's a peace mission.

"No weapons," Han repeated. "Oh, sure."

But outside the door he paused to pull a small blaster from a locker and conceal it beneath the back of his vest.

The two went on to the boarding ramp, and Chewie pushed the button to lower it. As they waited for it to drop, Leia came up to them.

"Come to kiss me good-bye?" Han asked with sarcasm.

"Listen you," she replied sharply, "I just came after you to say I don't know what you were pulling with that jealous stunt..."

"Jealous?" he echoed in disbelief. "Me?"

"Yes, jealous. But making Gowan look bad won't help anything. It's the Galaxy's problems we're here to solve, not our own. So, leave him alone. Understood?"

"Sure, Leia, whatever you say," Han agreed with a certain contriteness. "I just hope he's got more nerve for the conference than he showed just now."

He signaled to Chewie and they strode down the ramp to the ground. Leia watched him go, then went back to the cockpit. She arrived in time to see man and Wookiee reach the waiting party. She watched tensely as they met.

Though he walked casually, hands at his sides and well away from the concealed weapon, Han scrutinized the group suspiciously on approach, clearly anticipating a trick. But the group of some two dozen cloaked men, mostly elderly, made no overt move.

The frail but distinguished one in their front raised a hand in greeting as the two came up.

"Hello," he said in a soft but still powerful voice. "Are you Captain Solo?"

Han nodded acknowledgment. "And you're Senator Valladian?"

"Correct. I am glad to meet you." He looked around him with open appreciation. "It's a very clever place you've picked."

"Thanks. I have a good idea now and then."

"I daresay," the man said, eying him. "From the reports I've had of you, you're most shrewd. Tell me, is the Princess Leia with you? I haven't seen her since she was a girl."

"You can come onboard and meet her," Han offered, "...if you don't mind coming alone."

Valladian laughed. "Testing me, Captain Solo? Of course I'll come with you. You have my complete trust. Oh, and you needn't hide your weapon any longer, Captain. You'll have no need of it."

Han looked surprised by that. "You're pretty shrewd yourself," he said.

"I wouldn't have survived so long in the Empire without being so." The senator stepped forward and clapped a hand on his arm. "Come, my boy. Let's visit the Princess."

CHAPTER 15

"Your ship is ready," a voice called.

Luke Skywalker awoke from his doze and sat up on the row of crates he used as a couch, instantly alert. At the door of the grubby little storage room in which Luke was keeping out of sight stood the twelve-eyed insectoid known as Wioslea.

This member of the Vuvrian race was slender and yellow-green, with its long tube of abdomen upheld on stalky legs covered by simple robes. The large oblong head sported two long antennae and the numerous round eyes that some found amusing.

"It's about time, Wioslea" Luke said, getting up and stretching. "No problems?"

"Oh no," the being cheerily assured him in a smooth drone of voice. "The ship is in prime condition, as you verified yourself. Just getting it fueled. That and a bit of cosmetic work. Cleaning up. Washing down. Can't have customers leaving here in an untidy ship."

"Thanks," said Luke, "but I am in kind of a hurry."

He got up from the crates and crossed to a corner where R2-D2 was plugged into a power outlet. The little droid was shut down while its systems recharged. He tapped it on the head.

"Wake up, Artoo."

It instantly came back to humming, beeping life. Luke unplugged it, and it sucked the power coupling back into a hatch.

"Please, follow me," requested the Vuvrian, and led the way out into a corridor lined with racks of tools and doors to other parts storerooms.

"You know," the being said as they went along it, "I was considering again what a fine deal you got there."

"I thought so too," Luke replied.

"An amazing deal," Wioslea told him. "I just couldn't turn you down." But then he looked away, murmuring, "Although, I've absolutely no idea why."

They came out of the corridor and into a large compound fenced around with high barricades of wire. Its considerable area was crowded with a variety of ships, mostly smaller ones, and quite worn. As they wound their way through the maze of craft, much activity went on around them. The screaming and ratcheting sounds of power tools were nearly deafening. The sparking light of welding torches flared in several places, and the hot ozone smell of burning filled the air. Dozens of small creatures swarmed everywhere doing all the work. They were human-shaped, although everything but their glowing eyes was hidden by floppy, hooded cloaks.

Artoo's head swiveled about, taking in these odd little beings. The droid made some sharp noises of clear distaste.

"Don't insult them. They're some of the best mechanics around here."

"They work cheaply too," the insect-like being put in. "And, when things are very tight, why, they're quite tasty as well."

Luke looked sharply to the creature to see if he was joking. The Vuvrian's mouth flap seemed to widen into a ghastly semblance of a grin.

"Ah, there's your ship," Wioslea said, unfolding one foreleg to point.

Ahead of them sat a sleek, smooth-hulled YT-1760, perhaps half the size of the Millennium Falcon. One end was an egg-shaped passenger module with the round viewing windows of a cockpit at the pointed front. Attached to the fatter rear were the square mass of its engine and the huge cones of three powerful-looking thrusters. These

made the whole propulsion package look larger than the rest of the ship.

A small gaggle of Jawas were still moving around and underneath it in what seemed last minute inspection. The Vuvrian stepped up to one of them and asked:

"Is it ready to go?"

The Jawa gave a salute and jabbered an affirmative.

"Call your crew off then," Wioslea ordered. "The new owner wishes to go."

The other saluted again and trilled shrilly to the others, waving its short arms. The Jawas swiftly moved away from the ship, forming into a little, fluttering flock nearby.

The insectoid turned to Luke.

"This little hyperdrive speedster should certainly take you as far as you want to go, and as fast too. Not much comfort though. It's strictly a sport craft built for power."

"That's why I picked her," said Luke.

"Well then, good luck to you," Wioslea told him. "Oh, and, if you're ever interested in a job, I could certainly put you to work selling machines here. With your skill we could both make a fortune." The Vuvrian rubbed his forearms together all the more briskly at the thought.

"Thank you for the offer," Luke said. "But I don't know if I'll ever be coming this way again. Good-bye to you."

He went up the portable landing ramp set against the ship's side and through an open hatch. Artoo rolled up and followed him in. The hatch closed. Moments later Luke came back into view at the cockpit window. He waved down to the insect-like dealer. The whine of engines revving up came from the ship.

The still-grinning being waved a forearm in reply and moved back as the ship started to lift. The Vuvrian and his Jawa crew stood watching as the craft lifted straight skyward for some distance, then ignited its main engines to shoot up and away.

None of them gave notice to one Jawa at the back of their group who took advantage of the distraction to creep stealthily away.

Inside a well-furnished but clearly neglected room, the peace meeting between the Alliance and Empire was close to getting underway.

The room of the smuggler's base chosen for the conference had apparently been some kind of dining hall. Its wide variety of tables and chairs were of elegant design, superb craftsmanship, and exotically patterned woods. The rich textures of table services in a myriad of materials and styles filled breakfronts lining the walls. And in the room's center hung a huge chandelier of dangling jewel pendants. All these things bore clear evidence of the onetime successful smuggling operation which had gleaned the finest booty from all across the galaxy. But the thick pall of dust covering everything also spoke of its long abandonment.

Han and Chewy had taken some time to wipe the dust from some furniture and then move it together to form a single long conference table flanked by chairs. Several Imperial delegates now sat there, deep in conversation with Gowan. C-3PO stood behind the prince, taking no part in the talk, staring ahead in a detached way. Other of the Imperial senators talked amongst themselves, while Valladian held a private discussion with Leia and Han.

"I can understand you not giving us much trust," the Senator said to Han. "The Empire has certainly not done anything to earn it."

"Sorry to seem hostile," Han replied. "I've just spent a lotta years being sure they'd...*you'd* rather shoot me than talk to me."

"I afraid I must agree with you there," the senator said. "To be frank, most of them would rather see the rebellion destroyed than have to deal with it. Still, we here who believe most wholeheartedly in peace have forged a strong coalition. In this season of fear and confusion, we have for the moment become the ones wielding the power. If we can seize that moment to make a fair peace, I believe we can maintain the control."

"I've always seen the Empire as just a military establishment," Han said thoughtfully, "faceless, soulless, mindlessly following the leader. It's nice to find some humanity in there."

"Don't be too in awe of my great altruism, young man," Valladian cautioned. "Like everyone, I have some selfish motives in what I do. I am trying to salvage at least something of my own society out of this debacle, and I seek to gain a position of real authority for myself again as well. But on the unselfish side, I would like to see a time when the old days of honor are returned. I am very old." He smiled at Leia. "The Princess knows *how* old. I remember well what life was like before... well... all of this. Before treachery and violence became the way of things. It was a time of graciousness, bounty, and peace, wherein all creatures thrived."

"I have some sense of it," Leia said nostalgically. "On Alderaan they had preserved much of the old ways—its beauties, its beliefs, its freedoms." She paused, then added sadly, "All wiped away."

Valladian put a hand upon her shoulder. "Perhaps here, if the Force is with us all, we can make a beginning to restore that life to us. And young people like you two will shape it." He looked around at the others who were glancing toward them expectantly now.

"Ah, he said, "they are waiting for us. I believe it's time we should begin."

He moved toward the tables. Leia looked to Han.

"Well, ah..." she said a bit awkwardly, "I suppose you..."

"Yeah I know," he said. "I'm in the way here. You don't have to kick me out."

"Han... I..."

He held up a staying hand. "Don't worry. I'll wait outside... with the rest of the flyboys."

He turned away toward the door. But he was stopped by a faint rumbling sound.

The big chandelier shook slightly, as if the faintest breeze had shivered it. The faceted jewels flickered with light. Han noted it and looked back to her.

"Did you feel that?" he asked.

She looked puzzled. "Feel what?"

As if in answer, a louder rumbling sounded. The chandelier shook harder, its jewel pendants tinkling together, drawing all eyes to it. This time the vibration continued, swiftly increasing in power along with the growing noise.

Everyone looked around in alarm. The room was visibly shuddering now. Glassware and plates were bouncing on their shelves, some crashing down.

Solo made a decision. "Everyone—outside!" he barked, and headed for the door.

Leia and the others didn't hesitate to follow him outside. As Han came through the building's doorway, he stopped, Leia stopping beside him. While the others poured out past them into the open, he surveyed the cavernous space about them carefully. Chewbacca and

the pilots of Gold Flight who were standing nearby were already looking around in concern.

"What is it?" Leia said, nearly shouting to be heard over the rising noise. "An earthquake?"

"I don't know," he told her. "It's all around us." He lifted his voice to yell toward his comrades: "Wedge! Get to your ships! Chewie, go fire up the Falcon!"

Pilots and Wookiee immediately took off at a run for the craft parked across the landing pad. But they were only halfway to them when the rumble changed abruptly to a roar, and large fragments of stone began raining down from the ceiling.

The men paused. All looked upward. Some way beyond the end of the landing pad a huge circular spot had appeared on the ceiling of the cavern. The face of the smooth rock glowed with swiftly growing intensity. Then it disintegrated and was swept away as a swirling vortex of blue-white light appeared.

More circles of light above them drew the attention of the watchers. They looked around to find two other bright disks eating down through the ceiling on either side of them, the three forming a tight triangle about the smuggler's settlement.

As the disks dropped lower, their upper forms came into view. Each revealed itself as a massive machine of dull grey metal a hundred yards across. From the flat base with its whorl of disintegrating beams, the sides sloped up and inward, forming a dome eighty feet high.

When the whole of this dome had dropped clear of the shaft it had drilled, large panels checkering its sides slid open. Pairs of long, black tubes slid out from each hole into view—the twin barrels of heavy turbolaser batteries. The tiny figures of their black-garbed gun

crews could be seen inside, scrambling to firing positions. Within a few heartbeats each machine's rounded hull bristled with some forty sets of barrels in four tiers.

Those below stared up at these floating gun platforms in astonishment.

"Those are Subterranean Tunneling Attack Modules!" a horrified Valladian gasped out.

"Imperial Hedgehogs!" Han said grimly, supplying their nickname. "And ready to fill us full of laser bolt quills. Let's get the hell out of here!"

He grabbed Leia's hand and started for their ship.

The others, bewildered by the events, hesitated. But it was only for an instant.

The turbolasers on all three ST-AMs opened fire. The first red bolts of their energy arrowed in, striking the buildings. One exploded in a fat blossom of debris.

Gowan headed for the Falcon, Threepio behind him. The senators broke and ran for their own craft in panic as fire fell all about them. All but Valladian. Leia, seeing this, pulled her hand from Han's and ran back to him. Han, reluctantly, followed.

The senator still stood motionless, stunned, staring up at the craft in disbelief.

"Why?" he cried in dismay. "Why are they doing this?"

"We'll ask later!" Han told him. "Come on!"

He grabbed one of Valladian's arms and Leia the other. Together they hustled the older man toward the ship, following the droid and Gowan who had gone on ahead without even looking back.

The turbolaser fire was raining down thickly about them. Some of the senators were hit by a blast as they crossed the open and were vaporized in an instant.

Across the field, the Gold Flight pilots had reached their X-wings and were climbing aboard. One died in the act as a bolt struck his fighter, blowing it apart. The others were safely aboard and firing up engines as something else appeared from the newly bored holes above.

Strings of TIE fighters shot down out of the openings into the cavern. They opened fire at once as they targeted objects below, sweeping in to strafe.

More of the senators went down as the laser bolts exploded around them. A second X-wing on the ground and then a third just lifting off were hit, turning to blooms of flame and debris.

Han, Leia, and the senator reached the Falcon's ramp. Gowan and Threepio had already reached the top and were going inside. Valladian pulled up there to look back. He saw two more of his fellows cut down by a TIE fighter's fire. The rest ran a last gauntlet to reach their shuttle's landing ramp.

"Never mind them," said Han. "Inside!"

They all but carried the senator up the ramp and into the ship. Meantime, the remaining X-wings got safely airborne and went sweeping courageously up to meet the enemy.

The hedgehogs were an immense target, and the TIE fighters were so thick about them that the daring X-wing pilots found themselves in a turkey shoot. They slashed savagely back and forth through their opponents, hitting something with nearly every shot.

Their bold attack successfully distracted the Imperials, drawing much of the fire to them. And rash Imperial gunners, frantic

to hit the stinging fighters, instead began hitting their own ST-AM's with crossed laser bolts.

In the Falcon, Han and Leia paused to deposit Valladian on a couch in the lounge. Gowan was collapsed on the seat there, Threepio standing idly by. The other two ignored them in their rush to the cockpit.

Chewie began prepping the ship for quick takeoff.

"Powered up?" asked Han, dropping into his seat. "Let's go!"

He grabbed for the controls. Across the pad from them, the Imperial shuttle was already lifting, its side wings coming down.

A turbolaser shot hit its nose, driving it back down. It smashed against the ground. A second shot went home squarely against its back, annihilating it in a plume of flame. Han and his comrades winced back at the brilliant glare.

"Oh no!" Leia gasped in horror at the senators' destruction. "Han..."

"They're dead. We're still alive," he snapped. "Chewie, hit it!"

Man and Wookiee activated lift thrusters. The Falcon began to rise.

A crimson bolt shot past the windows to blow a crater in the floor just ahead. The blast rocked the ship.

"Whew! That was close!" said Han.

"It'll get closer," Leia said, pointing up.

Through the top windows they could see the twin muzzles of a ST-AM's turbolaser battery pointed right at them.

From the side, an X-wing shot into view. Its own guns fired, the bolts hitting the battery squarely. Both turbolasers and a section of the big machine's side exploded.

"Okay, get out of there!" Wedge's voice came from the comm speaker. "Quick. We can't hold 'em."

One of the other X-wings took a hit from a tailing TIE fighter and spiraled in to crash.

"You get out too, Wedge," Han ordered. "And try and take some of them with you!"

"Okay. Let's go," Wedge told his last wingman.

Together they headed straight in at one of the machines. Their fire blasted two batteries, the flames and smoke blinding the other gunners. The fighters shot up past them only yards away, skimming over the hedgehog's top and into the hole above.

A dozen of the Imperial fighters followed them. At the same time, Han was sending the Falcon forward, shooting the gap between two of the hovering metal monsters. Their crisscrossing fire fell about the ship. One bolt caught the rear quarter a glancing blow, jarring it hard.

"Left rear deflector out!" Han called as a red warning light pulsed. "But we're through."

Through the big machines, yes. But a dozen more TIE fighters were in hot pursuit.

In the shaft from the surface, the two X-wings streaked upward, followed by another dozen enemy craft. Their targeting computer screens began to flash a warning of objects ahead.

"Three more fighters coming down!" the other pilot cried in alarm.

"Never mind," Wedge said cooly. "Just stay steady. Steady..."

The three ships ahead closed, their own pilots taken aback to see fighters ascending. Wedge used their distraction against them.

"Fire now!" he said.

The X-wings' lasers took out two of the Imperials. The third one shot between them, still not firing back, and collided with one of those in pursuit, taking it and three behind it out in a single ball of flame.

The X-wings blasted from the hole into the open, heading up into space and away.

On the Star Destroyer hanging high above the surface, Tharkus was overseeing the battle on a bank of sensor screens. When he saw the surviving TIE fighters appear in pursuit of the rebel fighters, he got on a comlink to them:

"Never mind chasing those small ships. Everyone after the large one. It mustn't escape!"

Down inside the planet, the Falcon was at the moment trying hard to do just that.

"If we can stay ahead of the fighters until we find the next tunnel out," Han was saying, "we might just...

He was interrupted by a commanding voice from the comm speaker:

"Millennium Falcon... surrender," it said. "You can't get away."

"Who's that?" Han asked Leia.

"High Admiral Tharkus," said a voice behind them.

They looked around to see Valladian in the doorway, his face grim. He stepped forward to reply into the comm mike.

"Tharkus, what are you doing?" he demanded.

"Valladian," said the voice, faintly surprised. "So, you survived."

"You're a madman! You've broken the treaty and committed high treason."

"On the contrary," was the chill reply. "It is you and your senators who have conspired to betray the Empire, and I've sentenced you to death."

"You can't do that!"

"Who will stop me?"

"Our people will. You're condemning them all to destruction."

"I think not. I'm saving them from the likes of you. Surrender, Captain Solo. I want only Valladian. The rest of you won't be harmed."

"Go to hell," Han told him.

He swept around a pillar by a whisker's breadth. Ahead in the ceiling was the black spot of another tunnel to the surface.

He headed straight for it. But as he drew nearer, a dozen more TIE fighters swept down out of it, forming up to block him as they dropped into the open.

He brought the Falcon around in a sharp, banking turn, catching the following TIE fighters by surprise. The bigger ship flashed through them before any could fire and headed back the opposite way, now with two dozen enemies behind it.

And ahead could be seen the swarming mass of dozens more, spreading themselves to create a barrier before him.

"Okay," Han said heavily. "Maybe *now* I'm trapped."

Laser bolts streaked in from all around them, stitching the Falcon into a net of red fire.

"Well, she made the jump all right, Artoo," Luke said, rising from the pilot's seat of his new craft. He looked around the cockpit appreciatively. "Not a bad ship." He looked to the droid. "Well, what

do you say we relax? It's going to be a while to the Unknown Regions." He headed for the hatchway to the back. "I think I'll just get a little..."

A warning buzzer sounded on the console.

"What's wrong?" he said, checking the instruments. "We're dropping out of lightspeed."

He sat back down in the seat as the ship slowed and normal space again came into view. The winking dots of individual stars became visible, and the brighter points of some nearer plants showed too.

And right dead ahead of them was the immense, flaring sphere of a quickly swelling, red-gold sun.

"That's not good," said Luke with concern. He consulted his readouts. "And we're caught in its gravitational field. Engines are out." He looked to the droid. "See what's the matter, Artoo."

It rolled to a cylindrical access port for the shipboard computer, extended its own male connector and plugged in. As it began to read the ship's systems, a sexless, matter-of-fact voice sounded softly through the ship.

"Hull temperature rising. Five minutes to integrity breakdown."

Artoo began to twitter and squeak excitedly.

"You can't restart?" Luke read his reply on the readout. "The flight computer's been shorted out, the hyperdrive's down, and the power couplings are burned! Great! Can we fix them?"

It beeped a terse reply.

"What do you mean, 'not a chance'?" Luke said in alarm.

"Four minutes until breakdown," the uncaring voice said.

"Artoo," Luke told it with some urgency, "If we can't fix them, *we're* going to burn too!"

CHAPTER 16

Sweat beaded Luke's brow as the ship drew closer to the sun. The ship's interior temperature was rising fast.

R2-D2 was still accessing the propulsion systems data, searching for anything it could do to regain power. Without success. Luke had a floor access panel up and was checking the wiring.

"Three minutes until breakdown," the computer tonelessly pointed out.

Luke pulled up a bundle of turbo generator circuits. Some kind of energy surge had fused them into a jumbled mass. Luke looked on the damage with despair.

"It's going to take more than a Jedi miracle to sort this out in time," Luke said, frustrated. Then he added, "Well, Obi-Wan, looks like I'm really into it this time."

He wiped the dripping sweat from his eyebrows and looked around. His attention was caught by an odd phenomenon. His view of one section of the cabin seemed to be growing hazy, as if the heat were affecting the atmosphere.

He blinked and looked again. The hazy area seemed confined to a single, small spot near the floor. He stared harder. Within the spot a shape began to form. It was a shadow at first, but it quickly took on color and detail.

Soon revealed was the figure of an odd, hunchbacked little being of pursed features, wrinkled grey skin, and large pointed ears. It was dressed in a robe and carried a knobbed, gnarled stick.

"Yoda?" Luke said in astonishment.

"So easily give up, do you?" the Jedi master rasped out in a scolding voice. "Your bad habits—still with you they are."

"Are you really here?" Luke asked him, stepping closer.

"Only to your eyes am I," he replied. "Come back, I have, to give much needed advice."

"But, Obi-Wan said I couldn't get help once I started the quest."

"From him, no. But from Yoda was there more to be said. Concerning, it is, this road you now travel. Doubts, I have about it."

"You don't think I should do it?"

Yoda shook his head. "No. Find the Jedi's Heart you must. But your motives—examined them, have you? If not pure, doomed to fail you are."

"I want to understand the Force," Luke said, "and my part in it."

"Why?" Yoda countered. "For the good of yourself alone is it?"

"Two minutes until breakdown," the computer mentioned.

"Look, Yoda, could we talk later?" Luke said. "I'm kind of in a tough spot right now."

"Never mind that," Yoda said, waving dismissingly. "This spot is of your own choosing, young Jedi. Evidence is it of what I say." He lifted the stick to shake at Luke. "Reckless are you, still. Too headstrong. Going off on this quest so rashly. Taking such chances. To *prove* something could it be?"

"I thought I was *supposed* to do it alone," Luke said defensively.

"In such dangerous ways? Nearly died you have—*three times*. Listen to me. More than once before has your need to act for your own ends endangered all you fight for. Certain you must be that it is not happening again. Now it is good-bye I must say. My time with you is ended."

With this his image began to grow dim.

"One minute until breakdown," the computer put in.

"Wait," Luke called after the vanishing being. "Yoda, can't you help me?"

"No need," he called back in a fading voice. "Just consider what truly drives you in your quest, young Jedi. And remember that the real power of the Force wells from a *peaceful* mind."

As these last, faint words came to him, Yoda disappeared.

"Forty-five seconds until breakdown," the mechanical voice said.

"Thanks for the advice anyway, Yoda," Luke said to the empty spot. "But it doesn't look like it going to do me much good now."

"Thirty seconds to breakdown," the voice announced. "Twenty nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven..."

As it continued the countdown, Luke turned his attention back to the wiring. He was streaming with sweat, his clothes soaked through with it. Still he stubbornly went on checking through the fused circuits, seeking something he could do.

The little droid detached itself from its futile work and rolled to him, squeaking regretfully.

"It's okay, fella," Luke said, rubbing its side. "I know you've done everything you could."

"...fifteen," the voice droned on, "...fourteen ...thirteen... twelve..."

There was a loud 'clank' from the ship's rear.

The vessel shuddered as if something had gripped and shaken it. Its forward motion abruptly stopped. It hung still in space for a moment, then it began to move backward.

"Hull temperature dropping," the computer's voice said. "Countdown canceled."

Luke got up and went to the console. Beyond the windows, the blazing sphere was receding swiftly now. He consulted the readouts.

"We're in a tractor beam," he told Artoo. "Something's pulling us away."

He activated the rear viewer, and an image flickered to life on the screen. An enormous hulking shape—squarish and almost featureless—was behind them and drawing them closer.

"I don't think its Imperials," Luke said. "It doesn't look like any of their ships I know. Not that it matters anyway. There's nothing we can do to get away."

A door like a vast, hinged jaws slowly opened on the square object's front. The smaller ship was drawn into it—swallowed as a razor shark would a hapless saradin. The jaws closed.

A darkness fell about the devoured craft. Luke consulted his console again.

"The instruments don't tell me anything," he said. He checked the view screens and looked out the window. "And all I can see out there is black."

Another sharp "clank" sounded and their motion stopped. Now there was only a faint hum and vibration from the huge thing engulfing them.

"I hope it's not getting ready to digest us," Luke said.

A knocking sound came from behind him. He went to the cockpit door and looked back into the rear of his ship. The knocking was coming from the outer hull door.

"I think our hosts have come to call," Luke told the droid. He shrugged in resignation. "We might as well see just who's got us this time."

He walked back to the outer door. He spun its locking wheel and, with one hand on his light saber's hilt, pushed the door open.

A single creature stood there. It was chest-high to Luke, with wide head, short-muzzled face, and squat, furry body.

"Welcome to the salvage scow *Entrepreneur*," it said in a deep, growly voice. "My name is Captain Lucky Thatch."

"An Ewok?" Luke responded in surprise.

"You can't keep dodging them forever," Leia pointed out.

"There's got to be a way out," Han said stubbornly. "If we can just keep alive long enough to find it..."

"I'm amazed we've survived this long," said Leia.

"Just some fancy flying," he answered immodestly. "Plus some damn good shields." They were jolted by another hit on the port rear deflectors and Han checked on its status anxiously. "Just pray they keep holdin' up!"

He abruptly swung the Falcon into a hard right turn to evade a TIE fighter streaking across their bow.

The Imperial ships, some two score of them now, were buzzing all about the speeding Falcon as Han maneuvered her through the caverns playing hide-and-seek around pillars as he, Leia, Chewbacca and Valladian searched desperately for any way to go.

"So far they've had every tunnel we've found to the surface blocked," she said. "And they're closing their circle in around us tighter. It looks like a solid ring now."

"Then we'll just have to just blow a hole through it, won't we, sweetheart?" he shot back. "Chewie, take over," he told the Wookie, getting up from his seat. "I'm gonna man the quad guns." He headed out the cockpit door, calling back, "Oh, and keep looking for a tunnel!"

He ran back along the corridors to the core access well that ran up and down to the laser cannon turrets. He shouted to Gowan in the lounge.

"Hey, Prince! Come here!" He pointed to the well. "Get on the lower guns. Quick. We need firepower."

The man sat unmoving, staring at him blankly with an eyebrow raised. "Excuse me?"

Han stopped and stared at him in disbelief. "Don't tell me you don't know how to handle the guns."

"Sorry, old man," Gowan said. "Never had any reason to. All my training has been in..."

"...talking and looking great," Han finished. "I know. But ya'd better learn how to shoot *real quick* or..."

A laser bolt's explosion against the upper hull of the Falcon jarred her hard. A circuit wiring panel in the bulkhead burst open and sparks showered down.

"Threepio, take care of that," Han snapped at the still immobile droid.

Like Gowan, Threepio didn't move.

"I have warned you about giving me orders, Solo," he replied testily. "I will not do your dirty work."

Han released the ladder and stepped toward him, face flushing with outrage. "My work? Hey, we're *all* going to die here!"

"It's only what you deserve," the droid retorted, tone openly venomous now. "You and all the rest of your rebel scum."

"That's it," Han grated, patience flown. "You metal junkheap. I'm switching you off!"

He moved in, on the droid, an arm lifting.

Threepio swiftly countered with his own raised arm, fending Solo off.

Han grimaced with pain as the hard metal struck his forearm. He stepped back, grabbing the bruised part. The droid dove forward upon him, its hands going to his neck.

Both surprised and overpowered, Han was driven back to slam against the bulkhead. The droid's body pinned him there as its fingers tightened on his throat.

Han battered at the metal body and arms to no avail. He looked to a watching Gowan.

"Could I... have some... help here?" he gasped out.

"I... I'm not sure what to do," the aghast man helplessly replied.

"Anything!" Han implored.

Outside, another fighter swooped in on the Falcon, its fire striking the front hull in a fiery burst. The ship shuddered again, and warning lights flashed wildly on the cockpit console.

"Port bow shield down," Leia said, moving into Han's seat to check the damage. "Port beam shield failing. What's Han doing back there?"

Han was, at the moment, slowly choking to death. His view of the impassive, gold metal face close before him was beginning to fade. He was ceasing to struggle against the tightening hold. The breath gurgled in his throat.

A hand came up behind the droid, opened a back panel, and flicked a switch inside. The droid's big eyes went instantly dark. The body drooped, the hands dropping from Han's throat.

Han shoved the limp form backward, and it clattered full length to the deck. He saw that it was Valladian who stood beside him.

"Fortunate that I've studied a bit of robotics," the senator said.

"No kidding," Han said in a voice that rasped through his squeezed throat. He looked around to see that Gowan had moved not one inch to help.

"Thanks, Prince," he said sarcastically.

Another direct hit on the Falcon caused them all to stagger. A small splinter of the laser bolt breached the hull and zipped in to bounce around the room several times, striking sparks from the bulkheads while all ducked.

In the cockpit, Leia pointed ahead of them to a spot on the cavern's floor.

"Look!" she cried. "It's a tunnel. Quick, in there."

Chewbacca snarled in protest.

"Don't argue," she snarled back. "Do it!"

The Wookie aimed the Falcon into the hole.

He was just switching on the forward lights to reveal a long, twisting corridor as Han came back in.

"What are you doing?" he asked, still somewhat hoarsely.

"You said to find a tunnel," she replied as she got up from his seat.

"But this one's going down."

She shrugged. "Better than staying back up there."

"Good girl," he said, grinning at her. "I knew there was a reason I liked you." He dropped into the seat. "Okay, Chewy, I'll take 'er."

Behind them, seven of the more venturesome TIE fighters had followed them into the hole. They kept up pursuit, but without shooting. The twists and turns of the down-spiraling tunnel made

that impossible from so far behind. Still they were gradually closing on the bigger ship.

"This is a long one," Han said, peering ahead. "Maybe it'll take us right through and out the other side."

"We wish," Leia said. She took note of his hoarse voice and his rather disheveled condition. "What happened back there?"

"Threepio went berserk," he tersely explained. "Had to turn him off." He looked around him at the cockpit, assessing. "The old lady's taken some damage. Hope she holds together 'til we're outta here."

One of the TIE fighters had now come within close range. It fired, the shot bursting against the Falcon's stern.

"That's certainly not helping," Leia said.

"I can't put on any more speed," Han told her. "Not in here. It could kill us."

"And they won't?" she asked.

They were jolted as another bolt struck the Falcon's rear. Han growled and put on more speed.

The rock walls were a blur as they flashed along the tunnel, the Falcon's hull all but scraping the sides on the tight turns. But it worked. Their lead over the fighters grew.

Then, suddenly, around yet one more bend, they were popping from the passageway into the open again.

And again it was a vast space enclosed by floor and ceiling of rock. They had entered another cavern deeper within the planet.

The one difference from the cavern above was that its floor wasn't flat. It had a number of very large, grey-brown lumps scattered across it.

"Funny looking hills," Han remarked, examining one as they flew over. "Looks like they're covered with dried grass."

"Grass?" Leia repeated skeptically. "Underground?"

A red laser bolt flashed past them from behind. The Imperials had emerged from the tunnel and were screaming after them once more.

"Here we go again," said Han, gunning the Falcon forward.

They roared over several of the huge bumps. Then Chewbacca pointed ahead toward one and bayed a warning.

"I see it," Han told him. "It's moving."

The lump was quivering. One end of it heaved up as they flashed overhead. They caught a glimpse of a sleek, sharp-snouted face, tiny eyes, and curved gnawing teeth each longer than their ship.

"I thought you said those things were extinct!" Leia said accusingly.

"What do I know?" said Han. "Lookout!"

He pulled the Falcon into a sharp climb as another of the subterranean beasts surged upward before them, swinging a broad paw with immense digging talons. Their sharp points swept by right below the ship.

Now all the lumps ahead were coming alive, shaking, squirming, and lifting to reveal more shrew-like heads and razor claws.

"We're waking them all up," said Han.

"It must be the noise!" Leia told him.

"They sure wake up cranky," he noted unhappily.

They sailed on across what had become a heaving sea of brown bodies, long claws and teeth flashing up to snatch them or swat them down. Han dodged adroitly, taking the ship close to the ceiling.

The pursuing TIE fighters, with slower reacting pilots, weren't as lucky. The snapping teeth caught and crushed one. A sweeping paw slapped another from the air. Yet a third successfully dodged by one beast, only to slam into the high-thrust rear of another. Still, the four remaining ships kept doggedly to the chase.

"Look," said Leia. "There's a wall ahead. The end of the cavern."

"Yeah," said Han, peering toward the sheer face. "And there's an opening in it."

"Not for long," she said.

One of the disturbed beasts was scrambling in a panicked way toward the hole as if to seek shelter from the alarming noise. It was nearly there.

"We'll just have to get there first," Han said.

He aimed the Falcon into the rapidly dwindling gap between beast and opening. The long head reached it at the same moment they did, and the ship swept in past the pointed snout just as it plunged into the hole.

The lead TIE fighter tried to shoot the gap as well. But the space dwindled too fast as the beast crawled inward. The small ship was caught, forced upward by the body, and crushed against the tunnel roof.

Heedless of the minor explosion against its enormous back, the beast squeezed ahead, its bulk fully plugging the hole. The last three fighters were forced to veer away before colliding with the beast. They swooped around the closed tunnel in frustration for some moments, then turned back.

In the Falcon, Leia looked back at the beast-corked hole in the rearview screen.

"We lost them," she announced. She looked out the front window. "I just hope there aren't more of those creatures ahead."

"While you're at it," said Han, "you can also hope that this tunnel *goes* somewhere!"

CHAPTER 17

"...and I was swinging past the Trigora System on the way back from a routine drop-off when I found you stalled there, mate," the furry captain was explaining to Luke. "Lucky thing for you. A few more seconds and you'd of bought it sure."

The Ewok's voice was quite gruff and gravelly, but the words were still clear enough for Luke.

He and the captain sat in the main cabin of the tow ship, a relatively tiny room considering the square craft's overall size. Still it managed to be a cozy, den-like place. Thick rugs patterned in soft greens and browns hid the stark metal walls. Woven grass mats covered the hard floor. The young Jedi and his host were seated upon these, a small table between them. Large, pottery mugs filled with a steaming, fragrant drink sat upon it.

"I know how close it was, believe me," Luke told him. "And I'm really grateful for your pulling me out." He paused, then added a bit more awkwardly, "I...uh...I'm sorry I reacted that way when I first saw you, Captain Thatch. It's just that I didn't expect to meet one of your people way out here."

"Aye, I am pretty far from home, I'll grant you," Thatch growled in agreement. "And my line of work's a bit unusual for my kind."

The captain's own look, for an Ewok, was fully as unusual as his chosen vocation. Compared with the simple creatures of his home planet, Thatch's appearance was quite a dashing one—or, as dashing as a small, chubby, bear-like being's could be. He wore a short vest—his only clothing—made from rich gold brocade. A crimson scarf was tied in a sash about his waist, and a second formed a band about his head. A large patch of leather covering the right eye added to the soldier-of-fortune flavor.

Luke lifted his mug and sipped the hot liquid. "Very good bark tea," he complimented. "And this room—it's really nice too. I feel like I'm back in the hut of an Ewok village."

"Well, I've brought a bit of home with me," Thatch said. "Helps keep me in mind of the quiet old days."

"Why did you leave there?"

"Ah, well, I was always an adventurous lad. A trader fella had a breakdown on our little moon. Let me help him with repairs. By the time he was ready to go, we were fast friends. Offered me a job, he did, and I took it. Been roaming the galaxy ever since."

"You speak Basic very well," Luke noted.

"When you get about as much as I do, you've got to have lots of languages down pat. Deal with all kinds I do, in all places. Been very busy with my operation too. War makes for lots of business you know—ships in distress, hulks abandoned. Lots of good salvage. So, that's been my life. Now, what about you?"

"Me?" said Luke, taken off guard by the abrupt question.

"Aye, mate." The captain sat forward and fixed his one, sharp, dark eye enquiringly on Luke. "Just how did you come to be floating out there alone in that overpowered space trash?"

"I guess you can say I was just traveling around." Luke hedged. "Just visiting."

"No one 'just visits' nowadays," Thatch bluntly told him. "Out of Tatooine, judging from your direction," he shrewdly surmised. "In a great hurry too."

"I like traveling fast," Luke said, trying to sound casual.

"Really?" The Ewok sat back and took a drink of tea while he considered, then said musingly, "You know, I picked up an Imperial transmission on the way here. Seems a young fella like you caused

some big fracas in Mos Eisely. They'd like very much to find him again." He looked at Luke's cloak. "You wouldn't happen to have a lightsaber under there, would you now?"

Luke stiffened. His hand slid under the cloak to grasp the weapon's hilt.

"Easy, lad," Thatch soothed. "You're with a friend here. I've no love for the Empire to start with, and I'd surely not be causing trouble for a man who's helped my people."

"I don't know what you mean," Luke said guardedly.

"Come now," Thatch prodded. "I haven't lost touch with the home tribe, and the Alliance only left our planet a short while ago. Besides, everyone knows about the young Jedi who helped get rid of the Imperial base there. Skywalker, is it?"

Luke stayed wary. "Why do you think I'm him?"

"A young man with a lightsaber, paired with an old blue droid, running from Imperials and just leaving what was Skywalker's home planet? That's a heap of coincidences, mate. If you're not him, you surely should be."

"Okay," Luke admitted. "I'm Luke Skywalker. But, I'm not running from the Imperials. Not really. There's supposed to be a truce."

"So I've heard," Thatch said skeptically. "But you're still out on something more than a pleasure cruise, aren't you?"

"I... I'm trying to get somewhere. It's a long way from here—in the Unknown Regions. That's why I got that ship."

"Unknown Regions!" the Ewok was impressed. "A long way indeed. Some Alliance business?"

"No. Business of my own." Luke considered what he'd said, then amended it. "I mean, it's something that only involves me... or

well, I'm doing it separately from the New Republic. Anyway, I can't really talk about it."

"Secret, eh? And important too, I'll wager."

A door to the room slid open, and R2-D2 rolled in. It was accompanied by another droid—a metal ball fitted with a dozen varied appendages—which floated along in the air.

"Ah, Mack," the captain addressed the ball, "have you finished the diagnostic?"

"Aye, aye, Cap'n," it returned in a scratchy drone of voice. "The R2 unit and I went over all systems. We both agree. The ship is a loss. Damage irreparable."

"Irreparable?" Luke said in dismay. "Artoo, did you come up with the same diagnostic?"

It beeped and twittered an affirming answer.

"No need to doubt Mack," Thatch told him. "If it was fixable, he'd be the one who could do it. Seems you're without transport."

"I guess so," Luke said in frustration.

"Well," the Ewok said heartily, "that puts old Captain Thatch in the way of playing the samaritan. Couldn't do less than give a ride to you."

"That's nice of you," Luke said graciously, "but I'm supposed to go alone. You could take me to another settlement though. One with ships."

"Only one about here is back on Tatooine, and they're looking for you there. The way you want to go, Imperials just get thicker. Nearly solid they are between you and that sector of yours. Truce or not, seems to me you'd want to avoid meeting them. But they know me. They'll let me right through."

"I can't ask you to get involved," Luke told him.

"You're not, mate!" he said brightly. "I'm volunteering. Look, I'll not press you on your mission nor interfere in any way. Just let me be of service. It's my way of repaying you for the help you gave my people."

Luke considered. "Well, In any case I don't have more money to get a new ship, and my ship's going to be near worthless for trade-in." He shrugged in resignation. "Looks like there's not much choice."

"If you think you can trust an old scoundrel like me," Thatch said with a grin.

Luke eyed the little being, considering. Thoughts of the aboriginal Ewok people battling valiantly against the mechanized might of the Empire went through his mind. They were followed by an image of one other self-proclaimed scoundrel who had come to be one of Luke's most trusted friends—Han Solo.

"Seems I've had pretty good luck doing that," Luke told Thatch, smiling in return as he thrust out a hand. "I accept."

The captain swallowed his hand in a furry paw.

The Star Destroyer still hung in orbit above the sterile surface of the onetime smuggler's planet called Pellkadarr.

Below it, the dead lands with their wide-scattered peaks stretched away to the curving horizons. Nothing moved there.

Then, on one distant rim just within sight of the ship, something poked up from the hole atop a small cone.

It was a grey metal ball not much larger than a fist, looking quite smooth and featureless. But as it cautiously lifted farther into the open, a lid slid up on one side, revealing a lens. This mechanical, unwinking eye began to slowly swivel about. It panned the scene at

ground level, tilted upward to scan, and then froze as it pointed to the gleaming splinter of the warship high above.

On the side opposite the lens eye, a very small antenna telescoped out, and a tiny light on its tip began frantically to wink.

The remote sensor was sending an electronic message of what it saw down into the hole behind it, along the vertical shaft and into the shadows far below. There, well into the concealment of the dark and the intervening layers of rock, the Millennium Falcon hung, grappled to the sheer wall by its landing claws.

Inside the ship's cockpit, Han Solo gazed at the remote's transmitted image of the Star Destroyer on one of his sensor monitors.

"Damn," he said irritably. "That Imperial clunker's still hangin' on out there."

There was a responding grunt, and Chewbacca appeared from under the console with both paws full of tools. He growled a brief message to Han.

"You got it working, Chewie?" Han said with elation. "Well, *okay*! But look, keep at it, will ya? Try and get the port stern shield up too. I'm gonna go brief the others on what's going on."

He went back into the central lounge. Valladian and Leia were seated on the couch at the holo-games table, the old man slumping defeatedly. Gowan sat alone on the lounge's bunk. The still shut-down Threepio was now propped against a bulkhead. Senator and princess were conversing in subdued tones, but stopped and looked to Han as he came in.

"A few systems are out," he reported. "Nothing major. We've got full life-support and weapons, and the hyperdrive's okay. Shields...well, those I'm not too sure of. But we can fly out of here... if they ever leave."

"I just cannot believe that Tharkus would do something so monstrous," Valladian said, clearly still in shock.

"He was desperate to stop the peace talks," said Leia.

"Yeah," Han agreed. "That's what I figure too. It explains all the firepower. He was planning to make sure he got rid of all the witnesses so there wouldn't be anyone left to finger him."

"Yes, but he missed me," said Valladian. He drew himself up and a keen edge of determination came into his voice. "And when I get back, I'll raise an outcry against him. He'll be discredited, imprisoned and destroyed. And his precious military will only lose more power." He paused, now puzzled. "But, it's strange. He's usually a clever man. I don't understand how he believed he could gain by this."

"Well, what I want to know is how he found out where we were," said Leia. She looked to Han. "Was there a traitor in the base?"

He shook his head. "Nobody there knew. Just me. You know I didn't tell anyone 'til we left."

"And whose side are you on, mercenary?" Gowan said accusingly.

"Be quiet, Gowan," Leia told him sharply. "Han would never do that—for all his faults."

"Gee, thanks," Han said dryly. "I'm touched."

She ignored him, addressing Valladian. "Senator, what about your side?"

"All information on the meeting was kept absolutely secret from everyone outside our group—particularly the military," he said. "Only I knew this location. And, like Captain Solo, I kept it secret until we left."

"Then somebody passed word to this Tharkus *after* we left," said Han. "Somebody who came along on this peace mission was a traitor."

"If it was one of my comrades, then he must have known he might be committing suicide," Valladian said. "I find that hard to believe. I knew them all too well."

"That only leaves one of us," said Han.

All of their eyes went at the same time to the switched-off droid.

"You think it's Threepio?" said Leia.

"Don't you?" he returned. "I mean, he went crazy on me. He said we should all die. And he called everyone in the Alliance scum. That seems like pretty fair evidence to me."

"But, he's our friend," she argued. "He's been loyal to our family for years."

"He's a droid, Leia," Han pointed out. "And the Threepio I've seen lately sure isn't the one we know. He's been messed with by the Empire somehow, I'll bet!"

He went to the intercom panel and pressed a call button.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"We're going to find out," he answered.

There was a growl from the speaker as Chewbacca responded from the cockpit.

"Chewie?" said Han. "Get on back here. And bring your tools. Got a little exploratory surgery I want you to do."

C-3PO's gold head rested alone atop the work table of the lounge's technical station. Around it on the floor were scattered the rest of his disassembled parts.

Chewbacca was busily setting up a small machine and running leads from it to the mass of wires protruding from the droid's neck. Han, Leia and the others watched the process, fascinated.

"Once Chewie gets the analyzer hooked up, he can probe around inside that metal skull," Han explained. "Maybe we can figure out just what's goin' on in there."

"It's still hard to believe that he was working for the Empire," Leia said regretfully.

Han picked a tiny metal disk up from the table. "Yeah? Well we'd better be glad Chewie found this transmitter they stashed in Threepio's guts. At least he won't be passing on any *more* information to them."

He dropped the sphere to the deck and thoroughly ground it to dust with a foot.

Chewie finished making the last connection to the droid's neck. He switched on the machine. It hummed and chattered. The lights in Threepio's eyes flickered, then came full on.

So did his voice.

"Villainous beast," the head ranted. "What are you doing? Take your hairy paws off of me. And the rest of you—vile, nasty, insensitive humans. All of you should be..."

Chewie pulled loose a wire. The voice fell silent again.

"Thanks, Chewie," said Han. "Why don't you start feeling around inside there? Try to access his memory circuits."

The Wookiee took up a long and slender instrument. He inserted it through the neck and far up into the head, then began to probe around like a dentist searching for a hidden cavity.

As the instrument touched some sensitive point, an unintelligible yammer of sounds began to pour from the fixed slot of

the droid's mouth. Chewie finessed the point around slightly. The sounds gradually changed to understandable words, but still in meaningless jumbles. Then, abruptly, there came a clear passage:

"They've shut down the main reactor. We're doomed! They'll be no escape for the Princess this time."

"Chewie, hold it there!" Leia ordered.

"Secret mission?" the voice went on. "What plans! No, I'm not going in there."

"He must be talking about the time Darth Vader captured me," Leia said to Han. "When I first met you."

"Good," said Han. "Then you got it Chewie. Keep at it. Try to move him ahead."

The Wookiee shifted his probe infinitesimally through the complex circuits. As he did, he hopped along the droid's memories like a needle skipping across the grooves of a recording, picking up disjointed snatches of sentences:

"Chikka-Kee, Greetings… We seem to be made to suffer... Shutting up, Sir... Let the Wookiee win... No, shut them *all* down!... R2 has been known to make mistakes from time to time..."

"That's it," said Han. "I think you're moving closer to the present now. Keep it up."

"It's not widely accepted. But perhaps if it were, even being a cyborg might be easier to bear..." the voice rattled on. "Don't get technical with me, you overgrown adding machine!... Why can't the Wookiees celebrate Life Day without Orga-Root?... Oh no! I've been shot! ...Of course I've looked better... Artoo, you're playing the wrong message... Disintegrated?... Oooh, my eye!... But, Master Luke, what magic? ...this is no time for heroics!"

"He's definitely moving toward more recent time," Leia said. "Start listening closely now."

"I found that spectacle utterly appalling... Oh my word! We're doomed!... abandoned here like cast-off scrap..." the head said in a disgruntled tone, "...such a menial lot... fetching cheap Forgan ale for Master Solo... playing the slave... If I had my own way..." The tone suddenly altered to one of alarm. "Oh dear... mistake... wrong droid!"

"Okay," said Han. "You're right up to it. Sounds like he was grabbed. Must've happened when he went off alone at Eskendren City. Chewie," he looked to the Wookiee, "go on. Try for more. But real slow now. Get all you can."

Chewie moved yet more painstakingly. Words flowed again: "...I can't tell you that... such a treacherous act? I won't... betray my companions... oh... oh! NOOOOOO!"

This last came out in a long, pain filled scream. Then the voice abruptly cut off.

"Must be where the bastards did... *whatever* it was to him," said Han grimly.

"Poor Threepio," Leia said in sorrow. "He really must have suffered."

"He's just a machine," Han reminded her. "Chewie, go past that. Try to get into what happened after."

The Wookiee dug around some more with seeming difficulty. At last a few more fragments were forced out:

"...will send coordinates back..." the voice said, very mechanically now, "Tharkus... kill senators... destroy peace conference... find... the... hea...ea...hea..."

"Find the *what*?" said Leia

"He's fighting the probe," said Han. "Push harder, Chewie. We've got to know more."

Chewie bore down. The head sputtered and crackled as if circuits were shorting. The eyes flickered wildly. Then a last phrase was forced haltingly out:

"...the...heart...of the...Je...Je...Jed...Jedi..."

There was a loud 'pop' and a blue-white tendril of light flashed up the probe to sizzle against Chewie's hand. The Wookiee bayed in pain and dropped the instrument. A wisp of smoke curled up from the fur of his palm.

"You okay Chewie?" Han asked as the burned creature shook his injured member.

Chewbacca snorted and snarled out a fairly long reply.

"Well, that's it, then," Han translated for the rest. "Chewie says that any more memory access is being blocked. Real fancy reprogramming technique they used on him. Thorough."

"But, can't Chewie erase it?" asked Leia. "Change Threepio back?"

"Also real irreversible," added Han. "Trying to change him would wipe his mind completely. Sorry."

"So am I," she said sorrowfully. Then she steeled herself. "But we can't think about that now. There's something more vital."

"I guess so," said Han. "What did that mean, 'find the heart of the Jedi'?"

"Tharkus said something about the Force not being a factor much longer," recalled Leia.

"If that were true, then stopping the peace process would make sense," Valladian put in. "Should Tharkus become able to overcome the threat of the Force, he would gain all the support he'd need."

"Well, it's only the Jedi who really know how to use the Force," said Han, "so to destroy its threat, I guess he'd have to destroy them too."

"But they only know of one Jedi," said Leia with growing alarm. "That would mean that he's after..."

Her gaze locked with Solo's. They said the word together: "Luke!"

CHAPTER 18

Captain Vaskor marched crossed the Star Destroyer's bridge to where Tharkus and Kantos stood and saluted smartly.

"High Admiral, I have the latest reports," he said. "There still has been no further contact with the Millennium Falcon."

"What about the fighters which followed it deeper?" Tharkus asked. "Have you discovered why they broke off pursuit?"

"I questioned the two pilots who survived quite closely, Sir. They swore to me that they only broke off after they saw the rebel ship and one of our own smashed by an immense beast. They're certain it couldn't have survived. From what they described down there, I believe it. Those two barely escaped from the place with their own lives."

"Very well," Tharkus acceded. "We will assume that the Falcon has been destroyed. We have no more time to spend here. Captain, order the search parties recalled. Bring all our forces back aboard. Prepare to get underway within the hour."

Soon after his orders were passed, the last of the TIE fighters were streaking up from the planet and sailing into the big warship's landing bay.

Below, Solo and Leia watched the withdrawal process on the remote sensor's monitor.

"She's definitely pulling in her claws," Han judged. "I'd say he's finally getting' ready to go." He looked around and down. "Chewie?"

The Wookiee's hairy form was stretched on the cockpit deck, head shoved far under a console. From its depths a frustrated "whoof!" came back to him.

"Still no go on that port shield, huh?" said Han. "Well, it'll have to be good enough. Go make a last check on the engines, then come help me get the power up."

Chewie clambered forth, tossed his tools in the box, and headed back into the ship. Han began a run-through on the cockpit instruments. Leia continued to watch the Star Destroyer on the screen.

"Han," she called to him after a short while, "I think they're leaving."

He looked too. The last TIE fighters had disappeared inside the big ship. A blue light was beginning to glow within its engine cones. As they watched, the glow grew brighter, and the man-of-war began slowly to move, turning away from the planet, heading into space.

"There she goes," he said with relief. "Now we'll just wait 'til we're sure she's jumped to light, so there's no chance of them detecting us. Then we're outta here ourselves." He went back to work checking the instruments, tossing to Leia: "Warn our friends back there that we're about ready to fly, willya, Sweetheart?"

"Thanks," she said.

He looked up to her in puzzlement. "What for?"

"For not calling me 'Princess.'"

"Uh... oh yeah... sorry," he said in mock confusion. "I forgot."

"Just keep on forgetting," she told him with a smile. She turned toward the cockpit door, then paused to look back.

"If they ask, where are we going?"

"To find Luke before that Tharkus does," he said.

"How are we going to do that?" she asked. "He didn't file a flight plan before he left base. No one knows where he was going. He could be anywhere in the galaxy."

"Only anywhere within range of his X-wing," Han amended. "Hey, don't worry. I've still got contacts all over out there. I'll start contacting them once we're in the clear. We'll get some word on Luke, sooner or later."

"I hope it's sooner," she said gravely.

Luke stood on an overhead catwalk and watched a dozen spheroid service droids rummaging in the depths below. He was alone there, having left R2-D2 plugged into a power jack to recharge his energy cell.

The vast main bay of the square salvage ship was awash with bright lights now as Captain Thatch's robotic crew picked painstakingly through a massive pile of junk.

Around it were other loads of salvage, crowding the floor of the bay. The stuff was of all types and qualities, from Luke's own largely intact craft, to more-or-less identifiable pieces of discarded goods and equipment, to jumbled masses of what seemed purest trash.

The rotund Ewok captain waddled out onto the catwalk to join Luke and looked down from beside him.

"Find anything interesting, mate?" he growled. "Lots of folks think of me as just a rubbish collector. Wrinkle up their varied sorts of proboscises over the stinking job. A few see the high adventure in it."

"High adventure?" Luke repeated, amused.

"Sure! Wandering free through the Galaxy, searching for treasures. Always something new. Always lots of surprises. It's a free life too, mate. I owe nothing to no one."

"And you're all alone on this big ship?"

"Except for my trusty crew there," he said, nodding to the droids below. "Couldn't do without them."

"What are they doing now?" Luke asked, looked back down to them.

"They're my gleaners. Programmed them for the scavenging myself. They go through everything. Sorting the good from the garbage—that's their lot. They're just now checking over the load I picked up right before I salvaged you."

"That stuff looks like *all* garbage to me," Luke remarked.

"Ah, not so, mate," Thatch said with gusto. "Even in the worst of it, you'd be amazed what you can find. Why, once in the most rotted heap of swill, I found myself a giant Toscan pearl. But it's deceiving both ways too. What have looked some of the best pieces on the outside have turned out to be all fake or rotten within. A tricky business, knowing what's the real thing."

"But you do all right?"

"Come on," Thatch offered, "I'll show you a bit of my gleanings. You be the judge."

He led the way off the catwalk.

"Actually, there's enough business out there for a thousand the likes of me," he explained as they walked.

"There's trash cast off in the trillions of tons from nearly all civilized worlds, and I use 'civilized' loosely. Space is littered with their waste. I've seen planets with rings of the stuff. I've seen places surrounded by trash envelopes so thick it was blocking their sunlight.

There're even some where the jettisoned junk's mass is greater than the planet's—I swear to you."

They moved off the catwalk and into a broad corridor.

"You can see that I surely can't take it all," he continued. "I'm selective. That's the key." He touched his muzzle. "Got a keen noise to sniff out where the value might be."

They came out of the corridor into another large room. It was lined all about with shelves, cupboards, racks, and bins filled with all kinds of objects, sorted by type. It made a fascinating and impressive array. A floating curiosity shop on a massive scale.

"See here?" said Thatch with a note of pride. "This here is part of my salvaging." He pointed around at various spots. "Furniture there. Machine parts beyond. Scrap metals. Electronics. Plastics. Engines. Gadgets and gizmos. You name it."

"And you've collected all this in your traveling?" Luke said in open awe.

"I've collected all this in a *year*, mate. The abandoned wealth of a galaxy. All mine."

Luke walked along the room, glancing at the myriad of wonderful things. He stopped at one bin full of colorful, complex objects.

"What's this?" he asked, peering in.

"Toys," said the Ewok. "Good ones too. Amazing what gets tossed away by some bored brat."

Luke shuffled through the pile of playthings, picking up a humanoid baby doll. It opened its eyes to look at him as he touched it, wriggled in his hands, and softly cooed as if alive.

"You know," Luke mused, looking from it to the wonders all around, "when I see this, it makes me think about how much I've missed."

"What, mate? Seeing junk?"

"No, experiencing life like you have. For all I've done, I really haven't seen much of things. *Regular* things, I mean. Maybe that's my problem. I lived on a farm in probably one of the most isolated spots in the universe. From there, I went right off to war. These past few years I've seen mostly the inside of cockpits and bases hidden by ruins, ice or trees. Not much of a life, really."

He put down the doll and picked up a toy Stormtrooper of accurate detail and fully poseable arms and legs, complete with blaster rifle.

"We all make sacrifices for what we want to do," the Ewok sagely pointed out. "Why, I live in a rubbish bin, don't I?"

"But you have a chance to decide for yourself if you want to keep living that life," Luke told him. "Can you understand what I mean? When I chose to become a Jedi, that life became all there was for me. And even now, when I've started wondering whether that choice was the right one, I feel like I've given up my freedom to the Force."

He squeezed the toy trooper. Its blaster made a realistic firing sound and the muzzle flared with red light. It was pointed right at him.

"The Force!" Luke said sharply, casting the war toy back into its bin. "Sometimes I wish I'd never heard that word."

"Don't believe in it myself," said the Ewok bluntly. "Nothing controls me or tells me what to do."

Luke smiled at that. "Now you sound like a friend of mine. He's kind of a rogue too. He used to decry the Force too. Real independent." The smile faded. "He was, anyway," he went on more gravely. "He got caught up in all of this just like me..."

"There's no force that can control you unless you let it," the Ewok said stubbornly. "You said you made the choice. Well then, you can *unmake* it. You can take charge again. You can cut yourself loose."

"I can't do that," Luke replied with some frustration. "How can I? It seems sometimes like the whole galaxy needs me." He shook his head. "Talk about responsibility! The Force is in me, like it or not. Through me it saved my friends, saved the Rebellion, saved *your* planet, defeated the Empire."

"That may be, but it was some great load to be put upon one young lad," Thatch agreed. "Anyways, that doesn't matter now," he reasoned. "You said yourself that the war's ending. Doesn't that set you free? You can do what you want. You could fly off with me."

"Could I?" said Luke, eying the Ewok, clearly intrigued.

"'Course you could! Seems to me you've done enough for everyone else. Think of yourself for a change. I wouldn't mind a partner. It does get lonely out here at times. Come with me adventuring through the stars and let the rest go hang."

"I'm tempted, Thatch," Luke told him honestly. Then he sighed. "Still, I don't think I can just ignore the Force. I've got to find a way to live with it before I can do anything else. That's why I've..."

He stopped abruptly there, clearly realizing he was about to reveal too much.

"You've what, lad?" Thatch inquired.

"Why I've got to think about it some more," Luke finished vaguely. "But, thanks for the offer."

"It stays open, mate," said the Ewok. He consulted a watch-like device strapped about one furry wrist. "Say, look here, I've got to get topside and make the next course adjustment."

"I imagine it will be a long time til we reach the edge of the Unknown Regions."

"Longer than normal since we're wanting to avoid as much Imperial contact as possible. This course will take us through their thinnest point."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"Oh, no need. Look here, if you're after something to do while I'm gone, go on back there." He gestured toward the far end of the big store room. "I've lots of other goods that might interest you. Look around. There's ornaments, art, rugs and tapestries… clothing too."

He looked Luke's rather worn and dusty desert garb over critically.

"You know, your own kit's a bit ratty," he frankly observed. "Feel free to look and take whatever you like. See you soon."

He turned and trundled off, back into the corridor.

"Thanks," Luke called after him. Then he turned and started across the room.

He looked around him as he walked. It was a bit eerie now, alone in the half-lit room, surrounded by the looming collections of things. His footsteps echoed hollowly on the metal floor.

There was a strong presence here, as if the auras of age and people's lives surrounding all these objects were concentrated, hanging dense in the atmosphere. The blended essence of countless dreams, desires, expectations, disappointments, and disasters yet

lingering from past owners wafted from the things along with the scents of cleaning solvents and decay.

"Seems like I keep finding myself amongst the wreckage of past lives," he said as if speaking to someone. Then he laughed at himself. "Oh, I forgot. Bad habit." He looked around again, then added, "But I wish I'd brought you along for company this time, Artoo."

He peered into a bin to find it full of battered weapons of all kinds. Another one held stacks of ornamental stones. Most of these were broken pieces of past architectural adornment—decorations carved as geometric shapes, abstract designs, elaborate plants, or grotesque beasts.

Beyond this bin he came into an area taken up by clothing. Shelves crammed with footwear for all manner of beings reached toward the roof. Rack after rack of garments stretched for scores of yards.

He moved along aisles between the racks, examining the clothes. There were styles from modest to flamboyant, sizes from monstrous to minute, shapes from simple to mind-bogglingly complex. He felt some materials that were of coarse texture and primitive weave and others of technological creation so fine they were more like misty air.

The clothes were separated by general body type. After some wandering he came into the section that looked to be made for humanoids. A very large number of these were cast-off Imperial garb.

"That's no surprise," murmured Luke, looking along the lines of identical dark uniforms. There were also a good many stormtrooper suits of white armor in good repair—save for the scorch marks and neat burn-holes from lasers here-and-there, and even a few ultra-rare clone trooper pieces.

He moved on to a rack of more varied, civilian-looking clothes. He glanced down at his own battered garb, shrugged, and began browsing through the individual garments.

He paused at a simple, black outfit—tunic, jacket, and pants much like those he'd worn before—his chosen garb as a new Jedi. Then another garment farther along caught his eye. He pulled it out. It was a coat of rich, velvet-like cloth in a deep green, splendidly decked out with embroidery in silver about collar and cuffs.

Luke fingered the material thoughtfully. He gave a little smile. "Well, why not?" he said and began to pull off the worn cloak he wore.

But he paused. His eyes had fallen on something else and fixed there.

Through a gap in the hanging clothing, he'd glimpsed a faint yellow light.

Curious, he moved toward it. He reached the last rack of clothes along the wall. Pushing aside some garments, he found himself facing a small door, the lighted button of a locking mechanism at its center.

He considered it. He put a hand out toward the lock, but hesitated. Then, with conviction, he said: "Well, he did tell me to look around."

He pushed the button. The light changed from yellow to red. With a faint "click" the door unlocked, swinging open toward him.

Inside was revealed a dazzling treasure trove.

There were overflowing chests of gleaming coins and scintillating jewels. Precious metals cast into statues, jewelry, and plain ingots were packed onto shelves. A golden image of a rampant

lion-like beast was dominant, rising seven feet in the middle of the floor.

As Luke stood staring dumbstruck by this sight, a gruff voice spoke from beside him:

"I told you it was amazing what you could find."

Recovering from his surprise, Luke turned to look down at the Ewok, who was gazing on his gleaming collection with a gloating eye.

"You got all of this by scavenging?" Luke asked.

Thatch winked and smiled. "That's why they call me 'Lucky.'"

He stepped past Luke and swung the door closed on the enticing view.

"Come on," he urged the young Jedi. "Let's get some grub. We'll be reaching Imperial Space soon. Best we talk a bit about just what we're going to do."

CHAPTER 19

Han Solo strode out of the Mos Eisley Cantina and sauntered carelessly across the street to where Leia and Gowan stood waiting for him. Leia had changed to a simple garb of nondescript jacket and pants for their venture here, and her hair was back in its practical braids.

"Just like old times," Han said in a pleased way. "Can never forget what this place is like, even without Jabba in charge and the jawas gettin' all uppity. Almost forgot what a good ale was like, though." He used a sleeve to wipe a bit of residual foam from a corner of his mouth.

"I'm surprised you wanted to leave," Leia said dryly.

"Funny. Anyway, I checked out that Mos Eisley police report. We picked up on somebody with a lightsaber gettin' into a fight in the cantina. From what the guys inside told me, it must have been Luke who was here."

"Do you trust them?" asked Leia.

"Hey, they're old buddies of mine," he replied. "They wouldn't lie to me."

"More outlaw friends?" Gowan said with open sarcasm. "Most trustworthy, I'm sure."

"Listen, Princeling," Han told him tightly, stepping forward, "I'm getting very *tired* of you."

Gowan met his eye boldly, drawing himself up, and the two men faced off. They attracted the attention of a patrol of stormtroopers passing by.

"Knock it off," Leia hissed, moving between them. "You've got an audience." She smiled toward the troopers in her most innocent way.

Han looked around to them, then relaxed and grinned too, throwing them a friendly wave. "Try to look casual," he murmured to Gowan. "Or at least, not stuffed."

Gowan unbent slightly, almost cracking a smile as he also waved. The troopers exchanged looks and shrugs, then went on.

"Ok! They let us alone," said Leia.

"Prob'ly thought we were village idiots," said Han. "Now, listen: the description I got of this mean lightsaber-slinger matched our boy exactly. On top of that, he was seen taking off with a blue-and-white R2 unit. If that wasn't Luke…"

"It was Luke," Leia said with assurance. She looked around her searchingly. "He was here. I can feel him—just faintly."

"Not a bad talent you got there," said Han. "It might come in real handy. Can you feel anything more about him? Like, where he went from here?"

She concentrated hard, slowly panning the area with her eyes.

"It... it's very vague," she said. "I could be wrong..."

"It's still better than nothing," Han said. "What do you got?"

"I think he might have gone down there," she pointed to a street leading away. "There's a lingering sense of urgency about his aura, like he was after something."

"Okay then," Han said. "Let's go see."

"Must we all go?" Gowan said to them in a most pained manner.

The other two looked to him.

"Got a problem nosing around here?" Han asked. "A little scared maybe?"

"Not at all," Gowan blustered. "It's just that... well, this is *your* milieu. These people are your kind." He cast a supercilious glance

toward a tattered drunk passed out in the street before the saloon. "You fit right in. The Princess and I.... well, we'd stand out. It could be dangerous—for her. I should take her back to safety. Besides," he looked about at the filthy street and rather shabby pedestrians and wrinkled his nose in disgust, "there is a most unpleasant odor about this place."

"Now, wait a minute," Leia said hotly. "This is my brother we're talking about. There's no danger that is going to stop me from looking for him. You can go back to the ship if you want to. Tell the others what we're doing. But *I'm* going on with Han."

With that, she determinedly stalked off toward the side street.

Han gave Gowan a big smile. "Don't get lost, Prince," he tossed back to the man as he turned and followed after her.

"That was tellin' him, partner," he said to Leia as he fell in beside her.

"Forget him," she snapped back. "We've got more important things to worry about. And, don't talk to me," she added as they came into the side street. "Let me concentrate."

She paused, looking around her again, head lifted, tense, like a bloodhound sniffing a scent. Then she nodded and pointed ahead.

"Definitely this way."

"You said 'definitely this way,'" Han pointed out. "Now what?"

They had reached a dead end.

The grimy fronts of cracked stucco-faced buildings rose solidly on either side. A high wall pierced by a single small gate rose to block the way ahead.

Leia stood looking around her once more. But this time she appeared to be at a loss.

"I can't feel anything clearly enough anymore," she said. "I think he came here, but my sense of him just vanishes at this point." She looked to Solo, as if to say, "What do we do?"

"Okay, let's look at what we know. You said you think he was after something. Something he was pretty hot to get. I know he had gotten a hold of some money. He took some risk winning it in a card game, so he must've needed it pretty bad. I'd say that what he was after was to buy something. Something fairly big."

She gazed around again. "Here? Where?"

He looked around too. His eye went up to the symbols above the gate, and his expression lit. "I know this place. My bet is he came here!"

He moved to it and boldly knocked on the gate. There was a short wait, a shuffling from beyond the portal, and then it was opened by a jawa.

The little creature looked them carefully up and down, then it jabbered something to them.

"We want to see Wioslea," Han told it. "Tell him it's Han Solo."

The creature nodded and vanished inside for a brief time. When it returned, it swung the door wide and stepped back to let them in. It led them down a hallway through a building and out again into a large, wire-fenced compound filled with used space ships.

The insect-like Vuvrian smiled as he shuffled toward them, blinking its dozen eyes and waving its long tentacles about.

"Ah. Captain Solo," Vithas said. "So it is really you. A very long time since I saw you last. But, I had heard that you were dead."

"Not quite yet," Han assured.

"What can I do for you? A ship, perhaps?" He waved a foreleg around at the scattered craft. "That old vessel of yours must need replacement by now."

"We're not here to buy anything, Wioslea," Han said. "We're here after information."

"Oh," the being said with clear disappointment. "No dealing then? No money?"

"Sorry. We're looking for a fairly young guy. Human, white-skinned and blond. He had an R2 unit with blue markings with him. He might've come here to get a ship from you."

"Yes, that he did," Wioslea admitted. "An upgraded YT-1760. Very nice ship. Very nice indeed. He paid cash down for it too, though..." a puzzled tone came into his voice, "...not as much as I'd wished. In fact," he went on in deepening puzzlement, "I can't even believe I sold it at that price. Me, the hardest dealer in Mos Eisley." The puzzlement gave way to aggravation. "He gave me a mere pittance and I let him just fly away. Promised he'd make good the rest. And I trusted him on that as well. I must've been mad!"

"That sounds like Luke all right," Han said with amusement.

"Please, don't be concerned about that," Leia assured the creature. "If he promised you, then the balance will be made good... and then some."

"*And then some*," Wioslea repeated, rubbing his hands together greedily. "And exactly how much more?"

"Enough," said Han tersely. "But first you gotta tell us what you know. We have to find him."

"I believe I already have told you everything," the Vuvrian said. "He came. He paid money. He flew away. I learned nothing about him."

"You didn't find out where he was going?" asked Leia.

"He didn't tell me anything whatsoever," he answered definitely. "I did feel that he was in somewhat of a rush. He had to wait a short time while we prepped the ship, and seemed quite anxious about it." He shrugged his narrow shoulders. "That's all."

"Damn," said Han in frustration. He looked to Leia. "You can't pick up any impressions here of what Luke was going to do, can you? Anything at all?"

She concentrated hard for some moments, then shook her head. "Nothing." She waved around at the scores of Jawas bustling around in their work on the ships. "There's too much activity."

Han tried Wioslea again. "He didn't give you any hints, drop any careless line that might give you an idea of his destination? You're sure there wasn't anything else at all?"

The Vuvrian considered. "No. No... nothing. Oh...wait! There *was* one thing. A strange incident. Likely not connected to your friend at all. Just coincidence."

"Tell us anyway," Leia urged.

"Well, soon after his ship left, we found a jawa's body behind a pile of barrels. No sign of how he died. But he was quite old, and the little creatures are dying all the time." He paused, then added regretfully. "It was too bad. He was one of my best mechanics. Unfortunately he was quite tough, as well."

Han and Leia exchanged a raised-eyebrows glance at this last comment, but let it pass by.

"That doesn't help us any," said Han. "There must be something else."

He frowned hard as he racked his brain for other possibilities. Then his expression cleared as something new occurred to him.

"Say, Wioslea, what about his own ship?"

"Own ship?" the other repeated, clearly not comprehending.

"Yeah. There could be something on it that would help us." Han looked around. "Where is it?"

"He had no ship," the Vuvrian said.

"What do you mean?" asked Leia. "He flew to Tatooine in a small fighter."

"Right," said Han. "It must've been worth something. Didn't he trade it in?"

"As I told you," explained Vithas, "he gave me cash down. That was it."

"He didn't say anything about his own ship?" asked Leia.

"As I've said several times," the being responded with thinning patience, "he said nothing to me."

"How did he get to Mos Eisley?" asked Han.

Wioslea shrugged again. "Who knows? From his desert clothes and the amount of dust on both him and his droid, I suppose I must have thought he had come in from the desert. On foot."

"On foot!" said Han.

He and Leia exchanged a meaningful look.

"You know what that might mean," he said to her.

"Let's go X-Wing hunting," she excitedly replied.

Luke lowered himself slowly, gingerly, gratefully down into the warm bath.

"Boy, it's been a long time for one of these," he commented.

R2-D2 squeaked an enthusiastic agreement.

"Oh, you noticed, Artoo?" Luke translated. "Thanks. Well, I'll get you one too. I'm surprised you still work with all the grit in your innards. I'll ask Thatch if I can give you a nice solvent bath."

The two were in a rather plush bathing room of the plain looking salvage scow. It seemed obvious that the Ewok captain had scavenged its parts from his best pickings. The fixtures were of gold, the walls and floor sheathed in richly embossed ceramic tiles, the massive tub formed from real marble. The parts—gleaned from various places—didn't match especially well, but altogether still made a sumptuous impression.

Luke eased himself back in the tub and sank beneath the water with a sigh of relaxation.

He realized it was the first time he hadn't been on the move in days. And, much as he hated to admit it, there were times when he wished it could always be like this: quiet, clean, comfortable, and with a chance to think about things.

He considered his Ewok savior. There was no doubt that Captain Thatch did pretty well for a junkman. He cruised through the galaxy, at peace with everybody. He saw things and places. Luke could bet he met all kinds of interesting beings too—and without always having to wonder if they were going to kill him.

He sat upright, took up a large sponge from the side of the tub, and began to wash himself off. As he did, he continued his musings about the captain.

Luke had really never met anybody like Thatch before. That is, anybody not all wrapped up in their own big problems. Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru had been always worried about the farm. Always having to face the hard work. Always thinking about the next season. There hadn't been time for anything else. And almost

everybody Luke had met since leaving them had been caught up in the war.

He finished sponging off his front and looked to the silently waiting droid.

"Hey, Artoo, would you get my back for me?" he asked.

The droid obediently rolled forward to the edge of the tub. A small hatch in its midsection popped open and a rod with a claw end telescoped out. The claw took hold of the long handle of a brush sitting on the tub's side. It moved the brush forward to contact Luke's back.

Luke shifted around to get into the best position, giving directions as he did.

"Okay Artoo. A little higher. Left. Down. Ah! Right there!"

The droid began scrubbing in a vigorous up-and-down motion.

"Oh. Easy. Not so rough, Artoo," Luke cautioned. "I don't want the skin off. And there are a few tender spots back there."

The young Jedi's back was indeed much marked with bruises and lacerations from his recent scrapes. The droid reduced the pressure of its brushing and avoided the spots too.

"Better," Luke said. "Ah... very good."

He visibly relaxed further and continued with his thoughts, their nature becoming ever more introspective under the soothing effects of warm water and brush.

He had almost forgotten there was anything else but the war. Still, he knew there had to be a lot of places in the galaxy that didn't even know about it, and more that didn't care.

Well, he told himself in a dreamy way, it looked like soon nobody'd have to care anymore. Once the Empire had surrendered, it would all be over, wouldn't it? The Emperor was dead. The Death

Stars were destroyed. The New Republic negotiators would see that freedom was restored to the galaxy. There wouldn't be much need for a Jedi. It would be for Leia and the other diplomats to decide what the future would be and how they'd all get along. They could work out those problems themselves just fine... and without him.

The back scrubbing finished, Artoo put down the brush and moved back.

"Thanks, Artoo," said Luke. "That was great." He stretched himself out again in the bath, luxuriating in its waters. He sighed contentedly. "Maybe I just will take Thatch's offer once all this is finished. Maybe I'll just go off with him."

The little droid made a worried sound at that.

"No, I wouldn't leave you, Artoo," Luke assured him. "I'd take you along."

It beeped and tweeted some more.

"Of course I haven't forgotten Leia and Han. But I'm sure they'd understand. I've just got to..."

A low whistle from an intercom on the room's wall interrupted him. The gruff voice of Thatch followed it from the speaker.

"Don't mean to be interrupting you, mate, but when you're through there, would you mind coming to my bridge? We'll be entering an Imperial zone shortly."

"Be up in a few minutes," Luke promised.

The young man climbed at once from the bathtub. Artoo moved to pull a plush towel from a rack with its claw and hand it to him.

He toweled off quickly and moved to a dressing table. Two piles of clothes lay there—a set of new ones neatly laid out, and a pile of his old ones.

He looked at the worn and dusty garments he had worn since Tatooine. He glanced at the others which he had picked from Thatch's stores.

He picked up a pair of trousers from the new pile. "I'll wear these," he announced. "Artoo, you can throw away those others."

It was only a few moments later that he was stepping onto the *Entrepreneur*'s bridge, the little droid in tow.

The ship's control room was a small one. From a single, central chair, the captain could command all the ship's functions on banks of surrounding instrument consoles.

The Ewok swiveled the chair around toward Luke as the young man came in. His single eye widened in surprise and his furry ears twitched at what he saw.

"Ah, a new Luke," he said with pleasure. "Very good, mate!"

For Luke was now a quite flamboyant sight, resplendent in his chosen garb. Knee-high black leather boots fit over snugly fitting white pants with gold stripes up the sides. He wore a soft, full tunic of a silk-like silver cloth on top, and over it the green velvet jacket with the gold brocade.

"Is it okay?" Luke asked, a bit uncertainly. "I've never worn anything this... uh... bright."

"Fits like you were born to it," the other assured. "Is it comfortable?"

"Very," said Luke, fingering the shirt's cloth. "Nothing's ever felt this good."

"Then that's all that matters." The Ewok turned back to the controls, signing Luke to him. "Come here. Take a look."

Luke stepped up beside him and looked at a large forward monitor. It showed a section of space patterned with stars.

"Imperial Space," Thatch told him. "Last outposts of the Empire are not far ahead. But we'll give them a wide berth. And beyond that, the Unknown Regions."

"You don't think we'll have trouble getting through?"

"The way I'm going? Why, the chances of our even seeing an Imperial ship are..."

"What's that?" said Luke suddenly, pointing to another monitor. It showed a sharp-angled splinter of light sliding through space, and getting larger.

"Rear viewscreen," said Thatch. "Someone's coming up on our stern."

The following craft drew closer rapidly. Its distinctively slab-shaped hull and many-faceted bow were soon in clear view.

"An Imperial light cruiser," said Luke grimly.

And, as if to confirm, an officious voice crackled sharply from their comm speaker:

"Attention, unidentified ship. Stand to and prepare to be boarded!"

CHAPTER 20

The pursuing vessel was of a much smaller class than a Star Destroyer, but it was still well equipped with heavy turbolaser batteries, somewhat larger than Thatch's ship, and definitely more formidable in look.

"I thought you said they wouldn't be bothering us here," said Luke.

"Sorry mate," the Ewok said with clear dismay. "I was *sure* they wouldn't. Never had sight of a warship in this area before."

"Can we outrun them?" Luke asked.

Thatch shook his furry head. "The Carrack-class is as spry as one of your X-wings, especially one as modified as that is."

"I figured. How about weapons?"

"For us? Well, we've a few remote laser cannon batteries. Small things, though. Nowhere near the heavy armaments they've got. Doubt our shots would even pierce their armored hide."

"That doesn't leave us many options," Luke said with concern.

"Except to do nothing," said Thatch. "Relax, mate. This is likely a routine check by a sector patrol. We just let them board us, look around, and let us go. I've been through it before."

"You have. But won't they wonder about me?"

"What, my new partner?" said Thatch. "Why should they? Though, you'd better stash *that*." He pointed to the lightsaber on Luke's belt. "A bit too much of a giveaway that is." He eyed Artoo. "Best get the droid out of sight as well. You're too well known together."

The captain pushed his in-ship comm unit button. "Mack," he called into the speaker, "get yourself up here right away."

In moments the round, metal droid was floating onto the little bridge.

"Hand your weapon there to him," Thatch told Luke. "He can hide it."

The young Jedi detached his lightsaber from the belt. "No. I've got a place already. Here. Artoo."

The little droid rolled obediently to him. He popped open a small access panel on its domed head and slipped the weapon into the storage compartment beneath.

"All right, then, Mack," Thatch said briskly, "take our little mate off and hide him somewhere. Then take Skywalker's little ship and shove the whole bloody thing beneath a heap of salvage. Make it a nice, ripe pile too. Lots of slime and rot, and a good, strong smell." He looked to Luke and smiled. "That'll surely keep the nosy well away." To his droid he added, "Get on about it. And be quick. They'll be on us in minutes."

"Aye, aye, Captain," the droid's mechanical voice crackled in reply.

Luke watched it lead R2-D2 away. He felt a little anxious about his friend.

"It's all right," Thatch told him assuringly. "He'll be safe." He grinned. "Trust me."

The familiar words seemed to convince Luke, who smiled in return.

The officious Imperial voice sounded from their inter-ship comm speaker again: "Unidentified ship, have you copied our last transmission? We will send it only once more. This is an Imperial Patrol Ship. Prepare to be boarded. If we do not register your compliance to our order immediately, we will open fire on you."

"We should answer," said Luke.

"They're not in easy range yet," said Thatch, eying the growing image in the screen. "They won't fire until they are. So, we'll string 'em along a few moments more. Give Mack all the time we can."

They watched the Imperial cruiser swell in the screen as more seconds ticked by.

"Now, I think," judged Thatch.

He reached out for the comm panel just as the Imperial voice barked at them again: "Very well, unidentified craft. You've had your last chance to comply. We will now pass the word to open..."

Thatch pressed the 'send' button, cutting off the voice as he responded cooly, "Sorry, Imperial ship. Little problem with the transmitter. Old you know. Please don't fire on us. We are complying right now."

The Ewok began at once to operate his controls. The ship's main engines were shut down swiftly. Bow maneuvering thrusters fired in bursts and slowed the *Entrepreneur*'s forward momentum.

In a short time she was at a dead stop in space. She hung there while the angular Imperial ship slid up close alongside her port hull. The barrels of the warship's starboard gun batteries were all trained on her, ready for a broadside.

"Close enough," Thatch said with satisfaction, checking the Imperial's proximity on his screens.

"What do you mean?" asked a puzzled Luke.

"Just in case. But never mind now," the Ewok said. One of his stubby fingers pointed to a tiny craft leaving the warship. "They've sent a shuttle out. We need to hustle down and greet our visitors."

As the shuttle approached the square salvage scow, the massive jaws of its main bay doors dropped open to allow entry. The little craft flew in and across the huge expanse of the bay, passing over

the piles of scrap and rubbish to a landing platform at the rear. Luke's own little ship was no longer visible there, but one of the oozier piles of refuse had swelled considerably.

By the time the shuttle had docked and its door opened, Luke and the Ewok had arrived to meet the Imperial boarding party.

It was a small one, made up of a hatchet-faced officer and half-a-dozen crewmen. Clearly they relied on the massive firepower of their ship alongside to keep their catch in line. The officer carried only a short, black metal baton with a silver grip. His men were helmeted and armed with blaster pistols.

"I am Commander Ghek," the officer grandly announced. He glanced around him superciliously. "And what is this ship?" he demanded.

"The *Entrepreneur*, Sir," the Ewok supplied in an ingratiating voice. "She's a simple salvage craft, Sir. I'm surprised you don't know. I come through this sector all the time."

"Really?" the officer said, unmoved. He looked the small, chubby creature up and down. "Well I certainly don't know you," he said. "Just what kind of... *thing* are you anyway?"

"I'm an Ewok, Sir," he said, tugging a forelock humbly. "Captain Thatch is the name. Just a poor, simple creature trying to make his way in the galaxy."

"A rather unpleasant way," said the officer, wrinkling his nose in disgust. His gaze went to Luke. "And you—who are you?"

Luke opened his mouth, but Thatch quickly answered for him: "Oh, he's my first mate. Lykus Signus."

"Your first mate?" Commander Ghek repeated, eying Luke with an eyebrow arched in surprise. "You—a human—are in the employ of... of *this*?"

"It's a living," Luke said simply.

"Barely," Ghek answered, with much disapproval. The Empire's bigoted attitude toward other types of beings was undisguised.

"But, what can compare to the wonderful life of a great warrior for the Empire?" said Thatch.

Ghek shot him a sharp look, as if uncertain whether this was compliment or sarcasm. "Any other crew aboard this vessel besides you?" he demanded.

"Just some droids, Sir."

"You wouldn't be carrying any contraband, would you, Ewok?" He stepped forward to stand intimidatingly over the short creature.

"Course not, Sir," Thatch assured, looking up to meet his eye unflinchingly.

"Then you won't mind if we look around."

The Ewok waved an inviting arm about him. "Go right ahead, Sir."

Ghek looked to his men. "All right, search the ship," he ordered. "Standard drill. I'll be on the ship's bridge."

They divided into pairs and marched off into various corridors.

"Are you certain you wouldn't rather come to my quarters while you're waiting, Sir?" Thatch offered. "You could be more comfortable there. You could have some tea."

"No." Ghek stiffly replied. "I am on duty. You will conduct me to the Bridge.

The Ewok complied, leading the officer into a corridor. Luke followed behind.

"Look, all of this isn't necessary," Thatch called back to Ghek as they moved along. "I've had dealings with the Empire for years.

Never had any trouble before. I've always reached a fair understanding with the officers. We could have one too, you and I. One very valuable... to the both of us."

Ghek looked at him in a stern way. "Are you trying to bribe me?" he asked coldly.

"Oh, no Sir!" Thatch said quickly, sounding affronted. "Of course not, Sir. Wouldn't think of it!"

"Because, that would be very dangerous," the officer said. He rhythmically slapped his baton into a palm in a meaningful way. "Very dangerous indeed."

"Certainly it would, Sir."

They mounted to the small bridge. Ghek looked around at it searchingly, examined a few instrument settings, then fixed the Ewok with a glinting, narrowed gaze.

"Tell me," he said slowly, "where is it exactly that you're bound for?"

"Ah, well, we're just cruising about Sir," Thatch said vaguely, "visiting planets here-and-there, Sir, all about, Sir."

"I see. And just where have you come from?"

"Oh... well, ah, all over, Sir. Hard to say exactly."

The baton stick smacked hard into the palm. "Be specific beast," Ghek demanded. "And don't hedge. We can examine your computer's flight records for the truth."

"All right, Sir," Thatch soothed. "No need for upset, Sir. I picked up my last load from a moon in the Arkanis sector."

"Really now?" Ghek stared at him even more piercingly. "We had a report from that subsector to look out for a criminal who had escaped from a Tatooine Imperial patrol. Killed several men, I understand. Quite a dangerous being. He was said to have been

tracked on a heading in this direction, flying in a fast sport ship. You didn't happen to come across one of those, by any chance?"

The Ewok shook his head emphatically. "No. Not us, Sir."

A voice came from behind them. "Commander, look!"

They turned to see a pair of the armed crewmen march onto the bridge.

"We found these in a disposal bin, Sir," one of the men briskly reported. "It was about to be incinerated."

The young Jedi tried to maintain a stone-faced look as the crewman tossed a pile down on the deck before his officer.

It was of his old garments.

The commander moved forward and poked at the pile with the tip of his baton. He snagged the long outer cloak and lifted it to examine.

"Interesting garment," Ghek said musingly. He shook it. A rain of fine, glinting particles fell out. "Very sandy too." He looked up to them. "Tatooine is a desert planet, is it not?"

"We pick up things from all over," Thatch began. We..."

"Quiet!" Ghek swung his stick out in a hard, horizontal blow, catching the Ewok on the side of his head. The furry being went flying sideways, thudding down on the deck.

"You mangy little cur," Ghek snarled. "I want no more lies from you."

He lifted the garment higher. "Very long." He looked back to the Ewok. "A bit too long for you, eh?" He looked to Luke. "But, you!"

Luke tensed and glanced about him for some escape. But the Ewok was down, appearing stunned and helpless. The warship was poised to strike. There was nothing to do.

"Watch him," Ghek ordered.

While the two grabbed Luke's arms and put guns to his head, the Commander got on his wrist comlink to the other crewmen. "Back here," he ordered. "At the double!"

In moments, the other four came pounding back onto the platform.

"Two of you restrain him," Ghek commanded. "The others keep him covered."

The two already holding Luke both holstered their weapons, and each took a firm grip on his arms with both of their hands. The other crewmen kept their blasters trained on his chest.

"Now," Ghek said to Luke, stepping toward him, "let me ask you a few questions. And don't hesitate to answer them honestly."

He took hold of the baton's grip and pulled. From within its black tube a slender rod of a translucent white slowly slid into view. The blunt tip of it was a brightly glowing ice-blue.

"This is powerfully charged," Ghek said, lifting the rod's tip close before Luke's face. Its glow turned the young Jedi's pale face to a deathly hue. "It's quite useful for prodding the reluctant into being more open with us." Ghek smiled, his teeth gleaming with the blue light. "A few touches of it here-and-there, and even mutes have been known to acquire a voice. So now, my friend, is that garment yours?"

"No," Luke said flatly.

The blue tip lightly brushed across Luke's hand. Twining tendrils of the azure light flickered from it to run up Luke's arm. The limb convulsed from fingertips to shoulder blade. He stiffened as if from a strong electric shock.

"Very well. We'll try again," Ghek calmly said. "Are you from Tatooine?"

"No."

The tip touched Luke's chest. The net of light flared out across it from the prod's tip. This time, Luke's whole body shook in a brief but violent spasm. It left him panting hard.

"You are making this very difficult," Ghek said. "There are other places," he grinned sadistically, "more *tender* places where the effect will be much worse—even fatal—if enough pressure is applied. Shall I demonstrate? Or, will you talk?"

He began to move the rod's tip downward.

"Wait! *I'll* tell you," a gruff voice behind Ghek called.

The commander turned around. The little Ewok had partially recovered and was sitting up.

"What is it that you have to say?" Ghek asked. "Quick, now."

"P...promise that you won't do me any harm if I tell you all I know," Thatch asked Ghek in a squeaky, timorous voice.

"I promise nothing except that you surely *will* suffer if you *don't*," the officer shot back.

"But, I'm innocent," Thatch whined pitifully. "I didn't know who he was. I swear to you. His ship was broken down. Drifting into a sun, it was. I just saved him. Did him a good deed! I didn't know he was a bloody criminal!"

"Thatch!" said Luke, unable to hide his astonishment at this gross betrayal.

"Quiet, you," Ghek warned, shaking the rod at him. Then, to the Ewok, he said goadingly, "Go on!"

Thatch did go on, the words tumbling from him:

"I took him aboard not far off Tatooine. He offered me money to take him away—far away. When you stopped us, he said he'd kill me if I gave him away. A cruel one he is. Oh, yes Sir. Your killer for certain."

"I don't know," Ghek said cautiously. "What proof have you?"

"Look, he's got a weapon," said Thatch. "A special one. Some kind of a... well, like a sword with a blade of light."

"Blade of light?" the commander said with great interest. "Really? Show it to me."

"He's got it hidden away. But I know where. I can get it for you, if you'll promise to let me go."

Ghek considered, looking to Luke. "So you have a lightsaber, eh? Could it have been the infamous Skywalker himself who escaped from Tatooine? Could I have captured him?" He looked back to the Ewok, speaking decisively: "Very well. Get this weapon for me."

"Help me get up then," said Thatch. "I'll have it brought."

He extended a paw. The commander stepped to him, took it, and hauled the Ewok to his feet. Thatch shuffled over to his control console, moving with seeming pain.

"I only have to call one of my droids," he said, preparing to punch the communications button. "It'll fetch the thing for us."

"Don't do it, Thatch," Luke called to him. "Please!"

"There's no other choice," the Ewok responded. "Survival always comes first."

Commander Ghek looked around to Luke, smiling gloatingly. "Looks like we have you in our clutches at last, you murdering religious freak!"

CHAPTER 21

As Ghek's attention shifted toward Luke and away from Thatch, the Ewok acted.

With a lithe quickness that belied his apparent pain, the little creature grabbed the prod, wrenching it from the officer's hand.

"Wha...?" Ghek began in surprise as his head whipped back around to Thatch.

He never finished. The word turned to a rising scream of agony as the Ewok reversed the rod and drove its glowing tip ruthlessly, powerfully, and with a growl of satisfaction right up into the man's groin.

Blue light crackled outward from the power tip. It ran up in a ragged, spreading web across the officer's stomach and down in twining vines along the columns of his legs. He shuddered violently, body drawn up tautly, as his scream went on.

The startled crewmen looked around toward him, their gun muzzles swinging away from Luke. Luke used the opening to act himself.

He jerked the man holding his left arm hard around. The sudden move caught the man off-guard and he slammed into the man on the right. They staggered away, both releasing Luke.

The other four guards caught the movement and began to swing back. Luke's hand shot out toward one of the staggered men, his outspread fingers straining beckoningly. The man's blaster flew from its holster to Luke, the butt slapping into his palm.

Three quick shots from him and three of the armed crewmen were knocked backward to fall with smoking, lethal wounds.

The fourth returned fire, but the agile young Jedi ducked away, rolling to the shelter of the captain's chair.

The still-armed one who had held him yanked out his blaster and the two crewmen opened fire, their shots ricocheting from the chair in sprays of sparks. Luke's return bolts were more accurate, felling both.

Across the deck, Thatch now finally pulled the rod away from Ghek. The network of power playing across the officer died. He sagged to the metal floor like something boneless.

The final, disarmed crewman looked about at his fallen comrades in shock, then turned to run.

"Shoot him!" Thatch yelled to Luke, but the young man hesitated.

The Ewok did not. As the Imperial reached the bridge hatchway, Thatch hurled the rod. Like a dagger it flew, end-over-end, flashing to its mark. The glowing tip jabbed deep into the man's back just behind the heart. There was a single, sharp flash from the rod.

The crewman gasped. His neck snapped back. He toppled and crashed down.

"You should have fired," Thatch said to Luke, waddling to the downed man.

"I couldn't shoot him in the back," said Luke.

"He would've warned them," the Ewok practically pointed out. "Had to be done." He drew the rod out of the fatal wound. It was cracked and dark now, the power expended in the last burst. "Well, that's done for," he said, and tossed it away.

"What about their ship?" asked Luke.

"Aye, that's next," the captain said, moving to his console. "Got to act quick, too. They'll be wondering what happened to this lot real soon."

He climbed into his command chair, still smoking in spots from the blaster hits, and started working controls.

"What can we do?" asked Luke, watching curiously.

"We've no speed to outrun them," Thatch explained, "but we've surely enough power for something else. Tractor beams!"

He punched a final button. An electrical whining sound rose all about them, growing swiftly in intensity.

The Imperial patrol cruiser drifting close beside them was yanked abruptly sideways. Within it the entire crew was staggered, many falling down. In seconds the ship was drawn across the gap to slam against the salvage scow's flat metal wall of hull.

The square ship's thick armor plate smashed full onto the outthrust muzzles of the turbolaser batteries. Some guns were crushed, others driven from their mounts. A few exploded. Gun crews bolted in panic.

"Got 'em!" Thatch said with satisfaction. "Those beams have pulled the hulks of full-size destroyers out of high-gravity fields. This one won't be going anywhere. And she can't fire at us now."

"But, we can't go anywhere either," Luke pointed out.

"We don't want to. Not yet."

The Ewok pushed another series of buttons and pulled a large lever. Now a grumbling, grinding sound joined the whine of tractor beam power.

Huge panels at the bow, stern, and waist of the *Entrepreneur* slid open. From within the ship, three long points some thirty yards in circumference emerged, sliding outward on the expanding sections of thick, telescoping rods. Their tips flared with a brilliant, blue-white incandescence. They touched the side of the Imperial craft at forward,

mid-ship and aft points, melting their way in through the thick metal as if it was a soft cheese touched by three hot knives.

Within, the Imperial crew was just recovering from the first jarring, frantically trying to access what had happened to them, when the tips broke through.

A new confusion ensued. As the hull's integrity was breached, the inner atmosphere burst outward. Men scrambled to escape from the compartments as their air was voided and the freezing vacuum of space poured in.

But the penetrating points on their extending rods were relentless. They shoved on ahead through the inner compartments, melting in through the width of the ship, thrusting wide, ragged channels deep into her vitals.

"What are those things?" asked Luke, watching the spectacle on the view screens with mixed fascination and horror.

"Dismantling torches," Thatch tersely explained. "I use them for cutting apart salvage too big to bring inside. Though it's usually at a safer distance than this. They can dismember a full-size battleship in ten minutes."

And it was clear their work on this much smaller Imperial ship would go a great deal more quickly.

Within the captive and stricken vessel it was all chaos now. A very few men stuck to the bridge controls, vainly trying to break free of the scow's death grip. The rest ran helter-skelter through the ship as the tips rammed on in, burning through bulkheads, equipment, and machines, causing explosions and structural collapse.

Many of the surprised crew were trapped before they could escape. The rest managed to reach the craft's escape pods, and a

dozen or so of the small, round vehicles blasted safely away from their dying mother-ship.

Very soon it was over. The tips of the torches melted through to the other side and popped from the opposite hull. The Imperial, like a speared fish, hung helplessly impaled on the three points while the last of her oxygen bled away, and the last of her power died.

"Drilled her pretty well," Thatch proclaimed in an approving way.

He pushed buttons and pulled levers again. The three torches withdrew on their retractable rods. The sound of the tractor beams died. Released, the Imperial ship drifted slowly away. The sparkling electrical light of severed power cables flared in her gaping holes. No signs of life showed.

Luke stared at the wreckage with dismay.

"You've just killed several hundred men," he said.

Thatch shrugged. "Didn't leave us very much choice, now, did they, Mate?"

Luke shook his head. "I suppose not," he said regretfully. "I had just hoped that the killing was finally over."

"You're a soldier, Mate," Thatch said. "So long as you stay one, there'll be battles to fight. You can mark me on that."

"Maybe you're right," Luke said thoughtfully, looking at the dead ship. "Maybe you're right."

The Millennium Falcon flew out over the sands of Tatooine.

She sailed slowly and glided close above the ground while Han, Leia, and Chewie looked out searchingly from her cockpit at the monotonous landscape spreading far about them.

"I know old Ben didn't live real far from town," Han said as he piloted the ship. "It seems like the most likely spot for Luke to have come from if he did walk in."

"And one of the most likely spots for him to visit here," added Leia. "What better reason would he have had to return to Tatooine again? He told me he'd had a strong urge to come back and see the old places again."

"And he told *me* he was trying to find something he'd lost here," added Han. "Something to do with the Force. Well, Ben's sure the one that all started with." He peered ahead of them with a worried frown. "I just hope this is the right direction."

Leia too gazed at the still-empty vista. "It does seem like we've been searching this way for a long time."

"Should I try another sweep?" he asked.

"Wait," she said, her gaze fixing on something off to their left. "I saw a glint." She pointed. "Go over that way."

Han brought the Falcon around in a slow, banking turn. Soon a ridge appeared ahead. Then a small building nestled against its base became visible. Finally they could see that the glint was caused by sunlight reflecting from a flat glass surface. It was the front canopy window of an X-wing fighter.

Han slowed further and circled over the area while they scrutinized it carefully.

"That's got to be it," he declared.

"What's that?" said Leia, pointing again. "On the ridge."

He looked. In a sheltered spot atop the line of rocks sat another X-Wing.

"I don't know what that's about," he said. "But we've gotta check this out. Chewie, let's put 'er down by the house."

The Falcon slid in and settled to the desert in a brief flurry of blown sand. In moments her ramp dropped down. Chewie, Han, and Leia emerged, all armed with blasters, and walked cautiously to the ground.

They paused there to look warily around. The area seemed deserted. They approached the fighter.

"This one's Luke's all right," Han said as they reached its side. "I know the markings. Chewie, go up and check that other one on the ridge. Oh, and be careful about it, huh?"

The Wookiee barked an acknowledgement and went off. Han went to the equipment bay in the ship's side.

"I'll search in here," he told Leia. "You wanna check the cockpit?"

"For anything special?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Who knows? We're fakin' this, remember?"

While he opened the bay and began to poke through stored equipment, Leia climbed up the ship and into the cockpit. As the two searched, Valladian and then Gowan ventured out of the Falcon. They gazed around—Valladian curiously, Gowan with great distaste—then walked to the fighter.

"I've finished deciphering the reply to our coded transmission to Mon Mothma," the Senator told them. "She is relieved we have survived, but is naturally most distressed by what has happened."

"What about the cease fire?" Leia asked from the cockpit.

"They will continue to hold to it for now," he replied, "unless further provoked. She agrees that it is a most crucial priority at present to see that young Skywalker is found and protected if need be. You have her permission to proceed."

"Look here, is all this going to take long?" Gowan peevishly asked. "It's very hot here. I'm actually perspiring."

"Gee. Hope you don't spoil your clothes," said Han. He slammed the bay closed in frustration. "Nothing at all here that can help us."

Leia gave up her own search, climbing out on the wing of the fighter. "I don't find anything here either. He didn't leave any information on the shipboard computer. There're no messages. Nothing."

"Would the young man have left such a thing here?" Valladian reasoned. "It would seem he meant to conceal his ship by leaving it in this place. But should any one hostile to him come upon it, any information left inside would be easily found."

"The senator's got a point," said Han. "Let's try the house."

He and Leia crossed to the abandoned structure and carefully moved inside. The other two followed them, Gowan reluctantly.

"This place has really been trashed," Han unnecessarily remarked as he moved into the center of the house's single room.

"How squalid," said Gowan. "Some friend of yours actually lived here?"

Han and Leia both ignored him as they began to poke around. Han picked through litter on the floor, peered into any likely looking hidey hole. Leia moved around the room, searching with her eyes. Finally she was drawn to a studded chest in one corner. She opened it to find it empty.

"There doesn't seem to be anything here either," she said in disappointed tones, dropping the lid closed.

"Not that I can see." Han looked to her. "But, what about feelings, Leia? Do you get any sense of Luke here?"

She concentrated on the room for a moment. "I... I don't know," she said at last. "I do get something. An impression of some energy. But I'm not sure it's from him. And... I think it's coming from outside."

"Let's try to pin it down," he said.

They all went out. She paused, considered, then began to move slowly, step-by-step, like a dowser following the forked stick's vibrations to a well. She paced away from the house and around one side, making her way to the base of the ridge behind.

She stopped there, head cocked, face frowning, as if listening to some distant sound. Then she nodded and pointed to the ground.

"Something's here. Buried."

"If you say so," said Han. He gestured to Gowan. "C'mon, pal. Let's dig."

"Me?" said the astonished prince.

"Hey, you got the longest fingernails. Get to work."

With a glower at Han, the young man squatted by him and they both began to scoop away sand. As they worked, Han said with trepidation:

"I sure hope weren't not gonna find..." He stopped abruptly as he realized the horror of what he would say. He looked up to Leia.

"...find Luke?' she finished for him. "No," she assured. "I know it's not him. I'd know if he had died."

They had scraped away a foot thick layer of sand when they struck something. A square of heavy cloth had been stretched out and anchored at the corners by rocks. Han rolled it back revealing a hole. Something in the hole gleamed in the light from above.

He reached down and lifted it out. A smooth, milk white bowl of crystal came into view. He held it up. It shone iridescently in the sunlight.

Han handed it to Leia.

"Luke had this," she said with definiteness, feeling the object over. "He hid it here." She looked down into it. "There's something inside."

She reached in and pulled out a small, flat circle of metal.

"A transmission disk," said Han elatedly. "Come on. Let's play it."

Han slipped the disk into a slot on a wall console at the work station in the Falcon's lounge. From a lens above it a beam was projected onto the deck below. Within the beam floated the 3-D image of Luke Skywalker's head.

"If someone's seeing this, I hope it's you Leia," the image said. "I've figured that only you would have followed me here and that only you could have found this message in the bowl. If this *is* you, it probably means something's happened to me. I knew if it did, you'd come and track me down.

"I'm going into the Unknown Regions. There's a chance I won't get back. If I don't, I want this bowl to be in your hands. It holds a secret of the Jedi, Leia. That should be passed to you. Maybe you don't have the skills in the Force to learn it now, but someday you will. Keep it safe.

"Don't try to follow or find me, Leia," he went on. "This is something I've got to do alone. I hope you'll understand. Say good-bye to Han and Chewie and the rest for me. And, may the Force be with you all."

The image flickered and vanished. The transmitting light beam went out.

Leia looked from the spot where Luke's face had been to the bowl on a nearby table. "A secret of the Jedi?" she said.

"Maybe it can tell us where he went," suggested Han.

"How?" she asked, moving to it. "What does it do?"

"I'll bet there's some kind of Jedi trick to it," said Han. "Why don't you try some of that Force stuff on it, Leia? Try to concentrate."

She picked it up and held it out before her in both hands. She bowed her head over it, closed her eyes, and went tense. Her face drew into a hard frown as she bent her whole will to the task.

"Look," an awed Senator Valladian breathed, pointing at the bowl.

The milk-white crystal was beginning to glow.

It grew brighter, held steady a moment, wavered, then fluttered out like a blown flame. Leia relaxed and took in a deep breath.

"Sorry," she said. "Luke was right. I don't have the Jedi skills to make this work yet."

"Could you get anything at all?" asked Han.

"Some vague sense of a place... a planet, I think... very strong in the Force. But that's all. No idea of where it is."

She was setting the bowl gently back down on the table when Chewbacca entered the cabin.

"Chewie," greeted Han. "Whaddya find?"

The Wookie growled and grunted out a rather long speech to him.

"Ah, the other ship's empty," Han translated for the rest. "No sign who flew it either, except this."

Chewy held up a blue fighter pilot's helmet. They all examined it closely.

"A helmet from Blue Flight Squadron," Leia identified. "Why would he have come here? Luke left the base alone."

"Blue Squadron," Han said musingly. "Wedge."

"What do you mean?" asked Leia.

"Wedge told me right before we left that they found a guy dead. A Blue Squadron pilot. And his ship turned up missing."

"It's not missing anymore," Leia said grimly. "Han, somebody's after Luke. They're following him wherever it is he's going. I'm sure of it."

"It could well be some agent of High Admiral Tharkus," put in Valladian. "If he really does mean to destroy the threat of any Force-wielders, this follower of your young Jedi might be an assassin!"

"We've got to go after him, Han," Leia said anxiously. "We have to warn him. Give him help!"

"Luke told us he had to do this thing alone," Han pointed out.

"He can't know that he's in this kind of danger," she argued back. "He doesn't know what's at stake, including the New Republic."

"You're right there," he agreed. "We don't have much choice. But how'll we find him? He's got a long start. And we don't know where he's going."

"We know he's headed for the Unknown Regions."

"Oh yeah," he said dryly. "Some help. Do you know how big that section of the galaxy is? You wanna find *one* planet there? It'd be easier finding one sand grain in this desert! A trillion-to-one!"

"I thought you said 'Never tell me the odds!'" she retorted. "We've *got* to do it, no matter what," she added stubbornly, striking a

hands-on-hips pose. “We have to try. We’ll worry about the rest when we get there.”

Han looked at her and grinned. “You know, you’re starting to sound like me.” He looked around to the Wookie. “Okay then, Chewy. You heard the lady. Get the Falcon fired up. We’ve gotta long way to go!”

He turned away from them to mutter under his breath: “And I hope to hell we come back!”

CHAPTER 22

The box-like shape of Thatch's salvage scow swept around a blinking marker beacon at a safe distance and sailed on into the space beyond.

"There goes the last of the frontier, mate." The Ewok told Luke. "There's only the Unknown Regions ahead of us now."

"Do you have any idea why the section of the galactic disk has gone unexplored for so long?" Luke asked, peering ahead at the relatively same looking vista of blackness and stars.

"Well, pick your poison: a tangle of hyperspace anomalies, hidden empires brimming with advanced weaponry, ancient races, monsters of all shapes and sizes, the Wizards of the Night Spirit, you name it. It's not one of the densest packed fringes of the Galaxy, as far as stars go," Thatch surmised. But we've all heard tales that the place was... well, I guess *haunted* might be the best word."

"Haunted?" Luke said with interest, looking to him. "How do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. Just legends. Ewoks and starship captains are a superstitious lot. There are several somethings that are strange about the place, and most have heard enough stories to believe it isn't safe to travel here. There were preliminary probes of it, before the Great War, and even later. But no one's been paying too much attention to exploring it."

Luke stared more intently out into it.

"Haunted," he said musingly. "Still, somewhere out there is the one place I was told may have the answer to my fate."

"I... uh... I know it's a great secret and all," Thatch said hesitantly, "but, I think it's time you give me at least a bit more idea of just where it is we're bound."

"I'm not sure I know that anymore," Luke said in an odd, indecisive way. The great turmoil in the young man was clearly visible in his troubled expression. "I've been thinking, about what you've said. If I go to the... to where I was told to go, I wonder if I'll be doing the right thing. I mean, before this all started, all I really wanted was a chance to do something... something for myself. To be what I chose to be. Not a farmer like Uncle Owen wanted, or a soldier like the war's made me."

"I'm not quite following you there, mate," said the Ewok.

Luke struggled to clarify, both for Thatch and himself. "It's just that, at the beginning, becoming a Jedi Knight seemed like what I wanted to do. But since then it's just sort of taken over. I've been swept along, doing what it seemed like I had to do. There's never been time to think, to adjust, to find out what it all means. Do you see? I want to understand not just what a true Jedi is, but who and what *I* am too. Do I have to give up one to be the other?"

"I can understand having questions about that," the Ewok told him sympathetically. "No one should have to become anything besides what he is."

"That sounds easy," said Luke. "But you've never had the powers pulling and pushing at you that I have. I know you don't understand this, but I'm supposed to be going to a place where there's something a whole lot stronger than I am, than maybe any or *all* of us are. It could be I'll find all my answers there. But it could also be that I'll lose my chance to ever be free."

He stared out into the space ahead of them again.

"I can feel it out there already... calling me," he said. "It's... it's like hearing a song being sung, by a single, high, sweet voice, very far away but very clear. And it's calling to me, Thatch. Calling my name.

It's trying to pull me closer, draw me in, wrap me up... hold me forever..."

He broke off suddenly, turning to the Ewok, new words rushing out in a torrent of urgency: "Maybe we should run away. Just fly clear of here. I could leave it all behind, at least for now. I could sail around the galaxy with you, get some idea of life that's really my own. Maybe then I'd understand what I should do."

"Are you saying you'd cast aside this great quest you're on?" the Ewok said with surprise. "Just hang on there. Not so hasty lad. I know what I said before, but, listening to you now, I say it's not such a good idea."

"You've changed your mind about taking me?" Luke asked.

"No, mate. I'd be glad to have you. Just not right now is all. Not this way. I may be only a simple Ewok, but I know that whatever the challenge is you've got to see it through. You've said as much yourself. Until you've found your answer, you'll never have peace to do anything else."

Luke considered his words, then nodded. "You're right," he conceded. "There's no sense in trying to put it off. I suppose that means I'd better give you the course directions."

"Not right to the spot though," Thatch quickly cautioned. "You needn't be spilling its exact location to me. I'm of a race known for great curiosity, but we have great honor too. It's an important secret you're holding and I don't want to be pressing you to betray it, even to me."

"I don't see why not," said Luke. "You're my friend. You saved my life. I wouldn't have gotten so far without your help."

"Even so, you must let me respect your privacy in this. And there's no need to be compromising yourself. I've got a little shuttle of

my own. Only a short range hopper, of course, but it'll get you around a few close systems. So you can take it on your last leg all alone. I'll give you its optimum range, and you just give me a general heading to the outmost spot. When we're close enough, I'll lay off and wait while you go ahead. In case anything happens, I'll not know anything I'm not supposed to."

Luke considered, then nodded agreement. "Yes, that probably is better. I don't know what to expect. I don't want you in danger. And I *am* supposed to be doing this alone."

"Good," Thatch said with satisfaction. "That's all settled."

"Thanks," Luke told him warmly. "You know, I can't tell you how much good you've done for me, somebody I could just talk to about things. I mean, somebody who wasn't *involved*, who could stand away and look at things from the outside. I really appreciate that."

The Ewok patted Luke's arm with a furry paw. "You just go out on your mission and get it over with, my friend," he said. "After that, why we'll have all the time in the universe to talk."

A blackness like a heavy cloak enveloped Luke as he battled through a choking tangle of vines and came into the cavern.

He stopped in the smothering dark, panting heavily as his hunted gaze searched around him.

From ahead, a monstrous reptilian creature suddenly appeared, stalking toward him on thick hind legs, teeth-lined jaws slavering.

He backed away. But a noise behind brought him swinging around. A periscope-like eyeball on a stalk popped up from the

blackness as if rising from the sea. Long tentacles snaked forward from it to catch and entangle his legs.

He struggled, trying vainly to pull away. From his right, a massive ape of white shaggy fur lumbered forward to seize one arm. From his left, a fat slug of a creature oozed in to seize the other.

He was hauled taut, tugged three ways, lifted and held immobile, legs bound out straight and arms stretched far to the sides, as the monstrous reptile stepped in and opened its dripping jaws to close upon his head.

"Use the Force Luke," an advising voice came to him, echoing in the vast black.

And he was suddenly free, his ignited lightsaber humming in his hand, facing all the creatures that now stood in a knot in front of him.

He swept the glowing blade out before him threateningly, taking a step forward. The nightmare creatures cringed back in open terror. He smiled in satisfaction at their fear.

"Go after them," a sonorous voice boomed from Luke's right side. "They are your enemies. Release your anger. Destroy them!"

He glanced toward the voice. A new form loomed out of the shadows. It was a giant human figure, clad in black armor and helmet and death's head visor, enshrouded in a black cloak.

"Vader!" Luke breathed in astonishment.

"Join with me, Luke," the figure said in its commanding thunder of a voice. It lifted a hand to beckon to him. "I am your father. Join me and together we can rule the universe!"

"No!" he cried. "You're not my father!"

"But, I am." The voice was suddenly soft, compelling. The armor and the black cloak dropped away, revealing a tall figure of

shimmering light with a world-weary, benign face. "You know it to be true, my son. You cannot deny it. The Force is strong in all the Skywalker clan. Don't try to fight it."

"Don't listen to them, kid," said a voice from his other side. He looked to the left to see Han Solo standing there, smiling in his old, careless way. "It's all a big crock anyway. Forget those hokey religions. C'mon. You're a good fighter. I could use you!"

But even as Luke opened his mouth to reply, the image was shifting, transforming into that of a pudgy, aging man with an impatient look.

"You can play games with your friends later, boy!" he snapped. "You've got important work to do right here. I need you Luke. You can't just abandon us."

"But, Uncle Owen..." a dismayed Luke began.

He was cut off by another voice on his right. "Never mind him," it said sternly.

Luke turned back to see that his father's form had now been replaced by that of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

"He never understood you, Luke," the man reasoned. "He never had any interest in the rebellion or the Jedi. But you *have* to have. They all depend on you now. There is no other choice."

"There is," said a cracked, squeaky voice to his right. He looked there again, this time to see the small form of the Jedi Master in his robe, the gnarled walking stick in one hand.

"Yoda!" the bewildered Luke said with relief.

"Choices there are always, young Jedi," the being admonished, shaking the stick at him. "To think or not. To believe or not. To act or not. The light and dark sides of the Force are two branches of the

same tree. Try to influence or seduce you, they may, but control you, they cannot. That, your own choice is."

"Help me make it," Luke appealed. "Please, Yoda. I trust you."

"*That* is your first mistake!" the being replied.

His little form bulged, swelled grotesquely up and outward, and was torn asunder as another figure swiftly grew from it. It was a hunched figure too, also robed and holding a gnarled stick. But it was a larger, darker, more sinister being, and its features were hidden within the shadow of a cowl.

"The little one is wrong," it said in a harsh, arrogant, cackling voice. "The light is weak. It has no will to fight. No passion to win. You want to be a winner, young Jedi. You want to be in control. And you can do so! Only give in to your deepest desires. Follow your natural instincts. Embrace the dark side. Only then will you understand what you can *truly* be!"

With this the figure's hands lifted to the cowl, tugging it back. It fell away to reveal—not the Emperor's aged face, but the young face of Luke Skywalker, grinning back at him.

"Noooo!" he screamed as he jerked bolt upright.

He stared ahead of him, panting breathlessly. His naked body was streaming with sweat. He looked around him at the little cabin of the salvage scow and down at the bunk on which he had been sleeping. Slowly his breathing eased. His look of confusion began to clear as he reoriented himself.

He dressed quickly and went out, mounting to the bridge. The Ewok was on duty there already, in his captain's chair.

"Hello, Mate," Thatch greeted. "Did you get some sleep?"

"Sort of," Luke said vaguely. "I started getting restless."

"Well, it was a good chance that brought you up here anyway. I would have called you soon. We're getting close to your coordinates."

"I don't think it was chance," Luke said musingly. "Something told me to come right up here. It's like all my senses have been getting sharper the farther in we go. I can sense a lot more. And my brain's more active." He shook his head. "A little *too* active! It's calling up all kinds of things."

"Likely just excitement, Mate," Thatch said dismissingly. "You're finally getting close. It's natural."

"There's something else," said Luke. He frowned in concentration. "I think I can feel other energy. It's confused, but I think its minds...a *lot* of minds all working at once. There's a sort of drone from it, and getting stronger. Could there be someone else out here? Some kind of intelligent life?"

"The instruments haven't picked up signs of any inhabited planets around, but that doesn't mean much out here," Thatch said doubtfully, examining the sensor readouts on his monitors. "I just hope that... wait!"

He intently examined one of his monitors for some moments.

"We're being shadowed," he announced at last. "Faint blips of contacts just on the fringe of their range."

"How many?"

"I don't know exactly," the Ewok said. He looked again at the pips of light on the screen then lifted his gaze to Luke. "Lots!"

"Imperials?"

"I don't think so. Not out here."

"Unless they followed us."

Thatch examined the sensor displays again. "They're not just following. They're showing up on the sides, ahead, all around. Oh,

oh." He looked to Luke again. Even his furry visage couldn't hide his worried frown as he grimly proclaimed: "We're surrounded."

"But you can't tell by who?" asked Luke.

"No, but we're going to find out," Thatch told him. "They're closing in!"

And as he spoke, myriad points of light appeared dead ahead. It seemed at first to be a field of densely packed stars, but as it neared it resolved into a fleet of separate ships. Human and Ewok checked all the viewscreens. More ships were gliding in on the *Entrepreneur* from all directions.

There were many hundreds of them, perhaps a thousand, grouped so closely they seemed like an insect swarm homing in on some savory food target.

They formed a most bizarre and rag-tag fleet. All the ships were of a small to medium size, their outer hulls showing the scoring and wear of long space traveling. Their configurations were of widely varied, often strange design, and this strangeness was further amplified by the ships' markings.

For most of them had been lavishly and colorfully decorated. Some of their once-dull metal hulls were painted as birds or beasts. Some were covered with landscapes, portraits, and still-life images. Others were done in abstracts, geometric patterns or swirling masses of color. Altogether they made an intriguing and beautiful sight.

"Strange," remarked the Ewok, staring out at them. "Look at the markings. And the ships! All types. All periods. They must be from all over the galaxy."

"But they've covered up recognition symbols, emblems, serial numbers," said Luke. "There isn't any way to tell exactly who they are or where they're from."

"Shall we blast through them?" asked the Ewok. "They're pretty small. We have the power."

"I don't think we could do that without hitting a few," said Luke. "Why don't we just see what they want?"

"We did that once before," Thatch reminded him.

"I don't get any feeling of hostility from them," Luke replied. "I'm not going to hurt anyone else if I don't have to. Trust me."

Thatch sighed reluctantly, but worked his controls. Once more the square ship slowed to become dead in space.

The other ships slowed with it, forming up around it as a hollow sphere, the scow in the exact center.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," said Thatch. "So what do we do now?"

Before Luke could answer, they were hailed from the inter-ship communicator. The speaker was decidedly informal:

"Hey there, square ship... why are you invading our part of space? Do you come here in peace?"

"We're on a mission," Luke responded. "We only want to sail through without bothering anyone."

"Into the Unknown Regions?" the voice said skeptically. "Come now. No one comes here on missions, except for pirates and the government."

"It's a private mission of my own," said Luke. "I really don't mean any harm."

"A pilgrim, eh?" said the voice, interested now. "Well now, we're all on a pilgrimage here, friend. So, why don't you just prove it to us then? Stop and talk. Let us see who you are. Prove to us you're no threat."

"You're welcome to come aboard," offered Luke.

"Not hardly, pilgrim," was the answer. "You want us to trust you, you come here."

"Where?"

"Right ahead of you. Move aside, some of you others, and give our new friend the view."

A cluster of ships ahead parted, sliding aside, revealing a much larger vessel that lay beyond. Luke and the Ewok looked toward it with fascination.

It was in an unusual configuration, similar to that of a huge, spreading daisy bloom. The central disk of it was a gleaming dome of transparent material. Around it a dozen long, narrow wedges rayed out like flower petals. Each one was a different color, mostly pastel shades of pinks, yellows, and blues.

"Highly unusual craft," said Thatch. "More like a space station than a ship. And what is it that's under that big central dome?"

Luke peered at the masses of green vaguely discernible behind the curve of clear wall.

"Vegetation," he said. "I think it's a bioship."

"I don't like this," the Ewok said darkly. "Do you really mean to go over there?"

"Afraid so. But you stay here. I'll talk to them alone. That way, if anything goes wrong, you can still blast free."

"I could go over with you," the Ewok stoutly volunteered.

"You've done enough already," Luke said. "I got us into this. I'll get us out."

"All right Mate," Thatch reluctantly agreed. "It's your call. I'll show you my shuttle and give you a piloting run-down."

"Good," Luke told him. And into the communicator microphone he said: "Hello large ship. Do you copy? I'm accepting your invitation.

You can prepare to receive our shuttle. It might take a few minutes, though. Do you mind?"

"Take your time, pilgrim," was the drawled reply. "We of the Way Out Here are in no hurry at all."

CHAPTER 23

The devastated Imperial patrol ship drifted dead in space.

By outward appearances the ghostly wreck might have been flotsam on the star tides for an eternity. The internal flares of shorted electrical systems had faded with the final exhaustion of power. This had extinguished all remaining ship's lights too, leaving it only a dark mass of useless metal.

Not far off of its beam drifted another ship—the Millennium Falcon. The powerful beams of her front searchlights played across the hulk, pausing as they lit each of the ragged puncture wounds. In the cockpit, Leia and Han peered out at the grisly scene through the front windows.

"What happened to it?" asked Leia.

"I dunno," said Han. "Something pretty powerful. And it must've been some strange armament to blast holes through like that."

"Could it have been Luke?"

He shrugged. "We don't know about any other Alliance forces in this area. He only had a sporter, though. Nothing that could do this. I can't believe he would've got jumped anyway. Any decent pilot could zip right through the patrol zone easy. I've heard the Imperial screen here's pretty light."

"I suppose," she said slowly. She looked hard toward the ship. "Still... I have a strong feeling that somehow it was him."

"The *feeling* again?" Han said skeptically. "Kind of hard to get that in space, isn't it?"

"No. Actually it seems to be getting easier. My senses seem to be getting more heightened—as if something was making them grow stronger."

"If you say so," he said. "Can't say that I'll ever understand how this Force thing works with you two. Anyway, it means we're on the right track. I guess that's better'n nothing."

Leia looked to him. "Oh, Han," she said with concern, "do you think we'll find him in time?"

"I don't know Leia," he told her frankly. "We don't have any idea what's involved, who all's after him, or how far ahead he is. We've got to just take this a step at a time."

"It's only that I've never felt so lost," she admitted in frustrated tones. "So much is so wrong. Luke and Artoo are gone; Threepio's been so… *damaged*; you and I..." She broke off, leaving the last point unfinished.

He put a hand on her arm. "Hey, don't even think about that," he told her earnestly. "It's way behind us. We're working together now, aren't we? Just like always. And we'll beat this thing—just like always."

She looked at his hand. Her eyes lifted from it to his face. He smiled his crooked little smile of encouragement. Then their gazes locked with a greater intensity. They leaned toward one another, drawn together by a mutual impulse, their lips moving in to touch...

A self-conscious "Harrumph" sounded, and they pulled quickly apart, both looking a bit flustered.

Senator Valladian, standing in the cockpit door, looked a little abashed too at disturbing them.

"I'm very sorry," he said. "I just wondered what was going on."

"Oh, nothing at all, Senator," said Han, not fully hiding his chagrin. "I was just gonna set our next travel coordinates."

He turned to his controls while Leia turned to Valladian.

"This next leg will take us through an Imperial zone and then into the Unknown Regions, Senator," she told him.

"You probably want us to put you off at one of your outposts before we leave your territory. You don't need to continue this chase with us."

"Oh, but I do," he replied. "Tharkus has badly damaged our peace effort. He has left me alone of those most favoring it. Still, I might yet discredit him and salvage things... if he does not tamper with some factor of the Force. Were he to demonstrate that it was no longer in aide of the Alliance, he could regenerate the whole war effort. Before anything else can be done, I must see his plan stopped. So for now I intend to keep helping you."

"But if he did somehow tamper with the Force," said Leia, "the Empire might win. *Your* Empire."

"Not mine," he said. "It's clear that in the new regime Tharkus plans, not even the vestiges of the Republic would be left. My life is forfeit now. You heard him. I am a traitor in his eyes. Should he succeed, I and every other senator left will be hunted down. I have no doubt of it. I know the man too well. He is a military fanatic and totally ruthless."

"I agree with you there." commented Han, making the last instrument settings. "After the way he blasted your friends. I'd say he's prob'ly home tryin' to take things over right now."

The lone Star Destroyer rumbled ahead through space, passing the blinking frontier beacon.

Within its starkly appointed captain's cabin, Tharkus and his General Kantos played out an ancient strategy game on an antique checkered board.

The high-admiral's hand moved one of his slender chrome pieces out across the black-and-white playing surface to tap an ebony one of his opponent. The general's piece toppled over.

"Ah. You're in great jeopardy now, I think," Tharkus said with satisfaction.

Across the table a disgruntled Kantos picked up his fallen piece. He set it with a dozen others lined up at one side of the board. His remaining black players were becoming sparse indeed.

"The game is not over," he said stubbornly. "I have some moves to make." In demonstration he lifted a sinuously fluted piece and moved it ahead.

"Perhaps," Tharkus acceded, lifting one of his chrome men. "But it's only a matter of time." He set it down again. "*Check*, I believe. And likely *mate* too. I'm afraid my trap has closed."

Kantos growled and looked intently at the other man's strategic arrangement for some way out.

His consideration was interrupted as Captain Vaskor entered the cabin. The officer strode up to the table, clicked his heels and saluted his superiors smartly. Tharkus nodded acknowledgement.

"High Admiral, we have just entered the Unknown Regions," the captain announced.

"Very good," Tharkus told him. "What new word have you received about events at home?"

"We have been monitoring all transmissions from the Empire," Vaskor crisply reported. "Apparently the story is spreading quickly that the so-called peace meeting was in fact a Rebel trap and that our senators were brutally massacred by them."

"Really?" said Tharkus. "And what is the reaction from our people?"

"There is great outrage and there are calls from many that the truce be ended. But some voices still argue that this would be a grave mistake. They say that the Rebels simply want to goad us into more war so they have an excuse to defeat us utterly. The threat of the Jedi still holds them in thrall to fear."

"A very clear and concise summary, Captain," Tharkus complemented. "You may resume your duties now. But continue the monitoring, and keep me informed of any new events."

"Yes, High Admiral!" The officer saluted again and marched out of the room.

"Well, things are going as I intended," Tharkus gloated to his general. "My agents have spread the rumor effectively. The so-called *New Republic* will be blamed for this monstrous deed. Hatred and mistrust of them will grow. The need to strike back will be firmly planted."

"The people may still not follow you back into war," Kantos pointed out. "Not if they believe it will mean destruction."

"But once we have succeeded with the rest of my plan, there will be no stopping them. They will roll across the rebel forces in a tidal wave. We must only remove this absurd fear of the Jedi and their Force."

"Or perhaps co-opt its power to our side," Kantos put in.

"Still considering such a possibility, General?" Tharkus asked thoughtfully.

"As are you, I think," the other shrewdly replied. "It seems your interest in the... *possibilities* shall we say? ...is growing keener. I have heard it in your words and tone of voice."

"Perhaps. Perhaps," Tharkus conceded. "I do admit that the idea has been more active in my mind, and grows stronger as we

proceed. Why *not* believe I might control this Force? The Emperor did so, that much we have established, and he was no Jedi. Just an ordinary man—or, one who began as such. My own will is at least as strong as his, and my desire for the common good is much stronger. Why, for the Empire's sake alone it should be my duty to try to make the power work for us."

"Not for yourself?" Kantos put in. "Not to secure greater power?"

"Greater power? Yes. Of course! But not for me. For the Empire. To ensure it is transcendent in the Universe, eternal. For such a goal, Kantos, trying to subdue and bend the Force to my will may well be worth risking."

"Yet, how do you envision that such a thing can be accomplished?" the general wondered.

"For that we must wait until we see just what the nature of this 'Heart of the Jedi' is," Tharkus told him. "But if things go as I have ordered them, then we will be able to examine the situation and determine a method at our leisure." He smiled. "No one must interfere with us this time."

The golden metal arm of C-3PO spasmed with a shrill whining of its mechanical muscles.

The limb relaxed, then stirred slightly in a more natural move. One of its hand's articulated fingers quivered, then curled. The entire hand flexed, drew into a tight fist, then opened again. Finally the whole arm lifted, bent, and straightened again before dropping back down.

Han, Leia, and Valladian sat close about the droid in the Falcon's main cabin, watching in fascination as Chewie tinkered with

the metal man's complex mechanisms. The Wookiee was at the moment systematically working the droid's robotic muscles by triggering key diodes in the metal being's open chest.

"Not bad, Chewie," Han said critically.

Chewie gave a low growl in response and made some more adjustments.

"Has he managed to fix Threepio?" Leia asked hopefully.

The Wookiee paused to bark and snarl out what was for him a long answer.

"He says 'Sorry,'" Han translated. "He's just regaining control of motor functions and base level intelligence. He's leaving the higher levels strictly out. Can't trust 'em. But at least we can use him as a source of information."

"Like a walking encyclopedia," said Leia.

"'Fraid so."

Chewie made some more adjustments and flipped an internal switch. The lights of the droid's round glass eyes came on. Chewie nodded in satisfaction and snapped the chest access panel closed.

"Guess he's all ready," Han announced. "We should try him."

"Let me," said Leia. She sat forward. "Threepio," she said gently, "can you hear me?"

There were some unintelligible noises from the droid's mouth, then words came clearly: "I hear, Master. What is it you wish?"

The voice was Threepio's, but the tones were an emotionless drone. Leia tried again.

"It's me, Threepio. It's Leia. Do you remember me?"

"I am C-3PO," it mechanically cranked out, "human/cyborg relations. I am proficient in over six million forms of communication. My task is to serve. What is it you wish, Master?"

"Nothing," Han told him. "Forget it. Just take a rest."

"Rest is not required," it pointed out. "As a mechanical being, I have no need for recreation, sustenance, sexual fulfillment, or positive verbal reinforcement, as human beings do. I am not prone to euphoria, melancholy, love, hate, wistfulness, avarice, gluttony, sloth..."

"Enough," Han said, shaking his head. "Shut him down."

"Shutting down, sir," the droid said and fell instantly silent.

"Poor Threepio," Leia said sadly. "There's no personality left. He's lost his soul."

"He never had one," Han pointed out to her. "He's a droid."

"That's what you say," she responded thoughtfully, "but I think he had a more living, feeling heart than a lot of humans I've known, and more courage and loyalty too. Maybe he was *just a droid*, but he was also our friend. They destroyed that part of him, and I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Han said, regret now filling his own voice, "I guess I am too. And I'm kinda sorry for the rough way I've treated him in the past. Maybe I deserved his trying to strangle me." He patted the shoulder of the golden being in an affectionate way. "We'll get even for you pal," he said with grim sincerity, "I promise you."

"Get even?" That came from Gowan, who had sat lounging in a disinterested manner through all of this. Now he sat up, his face registering alarm. "Does that imply that you are contemplating some possibility of our being involved in a violent encounter with the Empire?"

"I'd sure say it's a possibility," Han told him. "I mean, we're pretty sure someone's after Luke. Could be just one, but it could be a dozen of 'em too. We don't know. So, what's the problem, Prince? You

afraid of getting your good clothes a little mussed? Hell, I'd be glad to lend you some old ones of mine, 'cept you don't like their style."

"What I am afraid of is getting hurt," Gowan retorted. "I am not a warrior. I've made that very clear."

"Oh right," Han said sarcastically. "You were only trained as a diplomat. Manners and protocol."

"Correct," Gowan said haughtily. "My life must be protected for the good of the Alliance. My diplomatic skills..."

Han interrupted. "Hey, your skills won't amount to a hill of cractus beans if this war takes off again. Tharkus succeeds, and the Alliance'll be fighting for its life all over again. Valladian knows that. Don't you?"

"Perhaps I do," Gowan hedged. "I just don't see what possible good I can do you."

"Fact is we're in a hurry," Han explained. "There's no time to put you down someplace, and nowhere to drop you at even if we wanted. Unless you wanna be dumped on some Imperial world."

"Well, no... but... uh..."

"Besides," Han went on, "we may just need every hand on a blaster we can get. That includes your lily white ones, prince boy."

"But I..."

"I know. You can't shoot. Leia, wanna give the ambassador here some lessons in laser fire diplomacy?"

"I'd be most happy to," she said, clearly without sympathy for the moping young man.

"Perhaps you might show me as well?" Valladian ventured.

"You, Senator?" Han said in surprise. "I didn't mean that you should..."

Valladian held up a staying hand. "I know, Captain. But I was a fair shot once, and I've been a soldier. This is my fight too. I won't be left out of it." He smiled. "And you did say 'every hand.'"

Han smiled in return. "You're my kinda guy, Senator. Okay, Leia, make it weapons-training for all." He looked to the Wookiee. "C'mon Chewie, let's you and me get back up to the cockpit. I wanna be on the job when we cross that frontier."

He started away, but Leia called after him: "Han, then what?"

"Step-by-step, like I said," he replied. "We just keep on and hope we find some kinda road sign."

"Or more feelings," she said. "I know Luke's out there. Right now he's somewhere ahead of us."

"Just remember I said, 'so's somebody else!'"

CHAPTER 24

A door slid aside on the rear of the *Entrepreneur*. From the landing bay inside it a small shuttle craft emerged. It was a tiny version of the salvage scow, looking rather like an infant version of the angular mother craft.

It turned to sweep around her and then headed away, sailing across the gap of space toward the surrounding hollow sphere of painted ships. The course it set headed it directly for the large blossom-shaped vessel sitting dead ahead of the scow.

At the shuttle's controls was Luke Skywalker, once again venturing out alone. He peered ahead through his front windows at the odd craft as he approached it, taking note of the growing details.

The long wedge-shaped rays could now be seen as being made of transparent sheets, tinted in various shades. When the shuttle passed directly above one of these petal sections, he was able to look down through the flat top surface to what was contained within. It appeared to be a piece of countryside, a pie-slice of landscape, complete with hills, fields, and streams, dotted with exotically shaped trees and gaudily hued plants.

Everything was like it might be on a whole planet—except for the light source. In the sunless depths of space, an artificial illumination for growth was supplied by massive globes suspended just below the shielding covers of each cell. These miniature suns glowed with a variety of molten-metal hues from a red-gold to a platinum-white, duplicating the sunlight of various home worlds.

Ahead of him now was the clear central dome, itself with a much larger globe of a warm yellow blazing within its peak. Beneath the dome grew dense foliage that was largely shades of green. He circled around the structure slowly, spiraling in closer. On one side, at

the dome's base, he spotted a platform projecting out from the smooth surface. A ring of pulsing lights atop it indicated it was a landing pad.

"Well, here goes," he said determinedly to himself, and dropped the shuttle gently down on it.

Immediately once the little ship had settled, a section of dome wall behind it slid aside, and the platform was drawn inward. The section slid back into place once it was fully within, enclosing the shuttle in the box of an airlock. Luke sat, waiting patiently while a whooshing sound without told him the chamber was pressurizing. When the sound stopped and an inner door began to slide open, he knew it was his time to emerge.

He went to the ship's outer hatch, started to open it, then paused. Purposefully he unbuckled his weapons belt, leaving blaster and lightsaber on the deck inside before going out. He stepped up to the inner door just as it slid fully aside, revealing his reception party.

They were a somewhat motley looking crew. In the three dozen or so waiting there, a wide variety of living species was represented. There were those of reptile, mammal, bird, and insect type. Some looked quite human. Some were so alien as to defy description.

A slim, furry, simian-like creature of huge lustrous eyes and long curling tail approached.

"So, you are the one who comes as a pilgrim," it said in a purring, breathy voice. "But, just where have you come from?"

"Before I answer, I'd like to ask you something first," Luke said cautiously. "Do you hold any allegiance to the Empire?"

This raised a resounding chorus of laughter from the lot—hoots, guffaws, cackles, twitters, and chuckles of glee. For all their seeming differences, the beings had that one trait alike.

"Allegiance he says," said the tailed one through his own giggling. "Why, my dear human, we are all of us here *fugitives* from the Empire."

"We left it to avoid the terrible fighting," put in another being of several limbs, lavender scales, and a dozen compound eyes. "Many of us fled from real destruction. More of us fled out of fear of it. Some came to escape conscription; others were deserters from the military. But all of us hold one belief in common: *we hate war*."

"Enough," said a humanoid being, pushing forward. His burly body was only clad in a short kilt, his arms and chest tattooed in broad, swirling designs. A long mane of jet black hair fell loose about his shoulders. His manner was a bit more aggressive than that of the rest. "Just tell us who you are now, stranger," he demanded. "How do we know you're not a spy for the Empire?"

"He's not a spy, Storm!" This remark came from a willowy young woman with flowing white-gold hair and a long, pale-green gown. She walked boldly up to Luke and looked closely at his face, her violet eyes probing his. Then she looked to the black-haired man. "No," she said with certainty. "There is no deceit in him."

"There are those in the Empire too devious for even *you* to sense, Aislinn," replied the one called Storm. He grabbed hold of her elbow and gently but firmly pulled her back behind him. Then he stepped meaningfully toward Luke. "It's what he could be hiding in that old junk scow that I want to know about."

"I'm not hiding anything," Luke assured him. "My name is Luke Skywalker. I was a member of the Alliance in rebellion against the Empire."

"Was?" the big man repeated. "What's that mean?"

"The war had already ended when I left," he explained. "The remnants of the Empire were fighting on, but amongst themselves mainly, and losing badly since the Emperor was dead. The Rebellion became the Alliance of Free Planets, and after successfully fighting off several invasions, became the New Republic"

Sounds of astonishment were raised in the group at these words. Clearly this was momentous news.

"Are you certain about the Emperor?" the long-tailed one asked.

"I saw him destroyed myself," Luke said. "With his power crumbled and the Imperial fleet on the run, they called for a truce. So far as I know, negotiations for a peace, under the conditions of the New Republic, are underway right now. They may already be ended."

"Peace," said a withered old man of bald head and long white whiskers. "After all this time. Why, I've been hiding out here since before the Clone Wars. Don't even know how long it's been."

"Well, it means you'll finally be able to leave if you want," Luke told him. "You'll be able to go home."

"I'm not sure it does mean that," said the one called Storm.

"Why not?"

"I think it's time that he went to see the Sky Pilot," the long-tailed one told the others. And, to Luke he added, "I believe that he can make all here clear to you."

"Yes," said the one called Aislinn, putting out a hand to him. "Come with me. You can trust me. I'll lead you to him."

Storm looked disapproving but didn't interfere as Luke took her hand and went with her. The others followed along.

They took him ahead into the mass of vegetation that all but filled the central dome. It was like a captured segment of a rainforest,

lifted bodily from its original location with all elements intact. Dense tropical foliage grew up all about them. Long vines and creepers dangled in intertwining array. The air was dense with the humidity. The fragrant scents of growing things and the earthy odor of plant decay blended in the heavy atmosphere.

Luke followed the sprightly young woman along a twisting, narrow path through the underbrush. Birds of brilliant plumage and effervescent song flew overhead. Small, curious creatures slithered or hopped out of their way.

"This place," said Luke as they walked along, "this... ship. What is it anyway?"

"It was an experiment to start with," the lavender-scaled being said. "Our Sky Pilot, himself, began it in his old life. He called it his *Crusade*. He took up sections of nature from threatened planets in an attempt to preserve as many of them as he could."

"You see," said the long-tailed one, "each outer segment of the disc is a separate, closed ecosystem, with a slice of its own planet intact. Atmosphere, soil, water, wildlife, plants, all maintained just as they were. Light duplicating that of its home sun. Even the tint of the envelope enclosing each matches the color of its planet's sky. Or, what was its sky for some."

"What was?" Luke echoed.

"Some of those fragile bits of life are now very, very rare," Aislinn said sadly. "The unique, beautiful ecosystems they came from have ceased to be."

"Ruined or destroyed by your war," Storm added bitterly.

Luke let the remark pass, but it stung him no less.

"It was when our leader saw that happening that he found he couldn't stand it anymore," Storm continued. "He took what he had and fled here, hoping to save at least this much."

"It's become our spiritual center, our heart, our whole focus of life, really," said the old one.

"What about this dome?" asked Luke. "Whose world is this?"

"The Sky Pilot's own," said Aislinn. "And at its core is his home."

They were nearly to that core now. Here grew a set of four trees, each twelve yards thick. They rose up in a square like massive columns, the greenery of the spreading branches at their tops brushing against the curved roof. As Luke's party passed near the base of one of them, he looked in amazement at its straight, solid trunk and at the high-arching roots about the base that buttressed its soaring mass.

Past these trees they came into a circular cleared area at the very center of the dome. Its floor was of beaten earth. Around its circumference was set a circle of a dozen rough-hewn standing stones, each of man-height. In the middle of this ring was yet another stone, shorter and squatter, its top rounded as if worn down. A lean, copper-skinned humanoid in a white sarong sat cross-legged beside it.

Luke and his escorting party stopped just outside the ring. At their approach the man seemed to have been sleeping or meditating, eyes closed, head down, hands folded upon his lap. But as they stopped, he looked up toward them.

He had a large, high-domed head, totally devoid of hair. His face was of a fresh-skinned, lineless type that made his age indeterminable, though there seemed a wisdom of uncountable years glowing in his startlingly silver-blue eyes.

He smiled warmly at Luke. "Our visitor," he said. "Welcome to our place of living."

"I don't think we should be so quick with that welcoming. We don't know what to make of him," Storm said bluntly. "He says he's from the Alliance, New Republic they're calling it now. Claims the war's ending."

"Step forward, friend, please," the man asked Luke, gesturing invitingly to him.

The young woman released his hand, smiling encouragement. "Go on," she said. "You're safe."

He nodded and stepped past the outer stones into the ring. As he approached the man, he glanced upward. The leafy branches of the four trees arched in and intersected to form a natural groin vaulting high above. That and the surrounding columns of the trunks cast the clearing in a cathedral-like atmosphere.

Luke stopped a couple of paces from the man. The bright eyes studied him piercingly.

"I feel a strange presence about you, young visitor," he said. "What is your name?"

"I'm called Luke Skywalker."

"Ah!" The man seemed impressed. "There's a name of much portent," he said. "It's the name of one whose very strides may shake the entire universe. Great ceremony indeed must have been involved in naming you."

Luke shrugged. "I don't know. I was born with it. It's a family name."

"Then a family of some vast purpose it must be," the man declared. "My own birth name was Nestor, a humble one at best. It was my people here, my new family of homeless children, who dubbed

me with the Sky Pilot title. They see me as a sort of spiritual leader, don't you see. A bit of priest, chieftain, and father all rolled into one." He smiled. "Hardly deserved, but there it is. It's a great responsibility."

"I understand that," Luke told him earnestly. "I hadn't even really begun to think of myself as a grown-up when I was suddenly an officer and leading men into battle. It's a terrible responsibility. And a lonely one."

"But, now, you say that war is ending," the other said. "It must give you great relief."

"I am glad it's over," said Luke. He waved back toward the others. "But maintaining peace is going to be everyone's responsibility."

"Indeed, wisely stated."

"Your people seem to think that even if there's peace in the galaxy, you won't go home."

The man nodded. "They are right in that. The reasons are many. Some of those in our little community no longer have homes to return to. Their dwellings, their towns, sometimes their whole plants were consumed by the fires of war. And then there are others who would be ostracized or even killed by their own people should they return to them."

"Why?" asked a shocked Luke.

"For acts deemed dishonorable, cowardly, or treasonous by their social orders. Those who refuse to fight in times of war, no matter what the cause, are not often looked upon with favor." He looked at Luke curiously. "You are clearly intelligent and knowledgeable. I'm surprised you don't know this already."

"There's a lot I don't know about how things work in the galaxy," Luke told him ruefully. "But, you're talking about those who refused to fight for the Empire."

"The Alliance as well," the other said. "We also have those with us who have fled from your organization, or from the threat of having to serve it."

"Ours?" said Luke, uncomprehendingly. "But we're trying to free the galaxy from tyranny. From evil."

"There is no greater evil than war," said the long-tailed being from behind him, "which is why we've eschewed it."

"But hiding here," said Luke, looking around to the group. "That can't accomplish anything. That can't end war. I mean, if you just drift around... well, what purpose does that serve?"

"What ultimate purpose lies in your own world of strife and striving?" the Sky Pilot countered.

Luke looked back to him. "What do you mean?"

"Do you think your efforts have eradicated war?" the man asked serenely. "You are yet young, and idealistic, but I think you will see with your own eyes that the ways of violence can only breed more violence; wars will erupt again and again. But we have found something more, something that transcends the physical realm. Something to make its tribulations unimportant by comparison. Here, in this peaceful zone of space, we have found a new reality, a new awareness. We have become truly free of our mundane trappings, free to indulge our senses, to open our minds, to float unfettered on the eternal currents of its power."

"Power?" Luke repeated.

"Yes. It is strong here," he eyed Luke shrewdly, "as I think you know. Understand, it wasn't *chance* that brought us all to unite in

this single area of space. We were all only seeking a place of refuge first, scattering through the Unknown Regions. But then a sense, a feeling of the power drew us here, consciously or not, binding us in a whole. Over the years we've come to worship it and to meld with it as best we can. We have become the Children of the Force."

"You know about the Force?" Luke said in astonishment.

"Those among us of sensitive or empathic characteristics understood its influence first. We have trained the rest to do so, through methods of releasing conscious thought, letting go, entering into the energy flow. And this ring I have constructed," he waved about him at the stones, "it is a place where those attuned can come to meditate, freeing the mind yet further. The shape of it seems to help."

Luke looked with interest on the simple configuration. "It does? How did you know it would?"

"Its form came to me in reverie," the man replied. "It seemed somehow the fitting design and construction. I've no idea why. But it certainly does seem to work. The effect of the Force is much stronger on those who cast their spirits loose within it. Even an ordinary being such as I can truly come close to overcoming the mortal illusion of crude material reality. See here."

He rose and climbed atop the central stone, sitting down again on its worn top. He put out his hands to the sides, closed his eyes, and concentrated. In moments his body slowly levitated. It hung suspended several inches above the stone for a few moments, then settled back.

"You've learned how to use the Force," Luke exclaimed, openly impressed

"In our simple way, a few of us have, yes," said the man, climbing down and resuming his spot on the ground. "But we would

not dare to do more. We are not grasping for power, but content to bathe in its flow, doing as we will in peace and pleasure."

"It sounds like an idyllic life," said Luke.

"Most fulfilling," the Sky Pilot agreed. "Only fear of the Empire one day coming after us has hung above our heads as a dark cloud. Now, it seems even that interference with the light will be swept away. But, what of yourself? Have you also determined to renounce your past life? Is that why you've come here?"

"Say that it is," Aislinn told him eagerly. "I know our spirit of freedom is strong in you. Please, join with us."

"I can't," Luke said. "It's really tempting, but I can't. I have to go on."

"Go on," their leader said, eying him and nodding sagely. "I thought as much, my friend. You seek the place beyond. That sacred nexus of the Force."

"You know about that too?" asked Luke.

"Of course. We have always understood where the streams of power flowing so densely through this part of space have their main link. It is not difficult to sense. Our drifting on their ebbs and floods keeps us close around the periphery of the great crossing point's strong aura. But not too close."

"You mean you haven't gone there?"

"Oh, some did. In the early days a few who thought their own rapport with the Force was strong enough went to seek oneness within that hub of energy. None of them returned. I often say that none of us is truly worthy. Besides, our own abilities are not developed enough. We do not have the calling. So we have declared it as a holy place, not to be violated."

"I'm still afraid that is where I have to go," Luke told him.

"He's a damned desecrator." Storm called to his leader. "He wants to profane our sacred ground. This is a trick!"

"He was a stormtrooper until their violence drove him away," the Sky Pilot explained to Luke. "His views have become mellower since he came to us. But he still has a distrust."

"I can understand that," said Luke. "But it's no trick. I have a need to go there. I'm a Jedi Knight."

"A Jedi?" the long-tailed being repeated skeptically. "They have ceased to exist. All their knowledge is lost."

"Not quite," Luke answered. "I was trained by the last two. I really am a Jedi."

"Don't listen," said Storm. "He's not one of us. He's an Alliance warrior. I smell the blood on him."

The others exchanged uncertain glances at this. The Sky Pilot considered his people for a moment, then looked to Luke.

"I believe what you are, young man," he said. "I feel the power in you. Perhaps if you demonstrated to them…"

Luke nodded. "All right." He looked to the others. "I'll try to show you what I am."

They spread out around the ring as Luke walked to its middle. He stopped by the central stone. Lifting his hands above it, he frowned in concentration.

The central rock soon shivered, and then lifted bodily from the ground, hanging suspended. Luke slowly turned around, his hands taking in the outer stones. One-by-one they pulled loose from the ground and rose upward as well. The watchers gasped in surprise.

But his show was not finished. Once more he pivoted, swinging his hands around. This time it was the people who rose upward to

float a foot above the ground. Most looked astonished as they were lifted. Aislinn laughed with delight. Storm looked aghast.

Lastly Luke's hands passed over the Sky Pilot, raising him too.

"I knew it!" the man cried in mixed delight and awe. "Truly, he does have the Jedi's power!"

CHAPTER 25

"Do you have to leave us?" the woman called Aislinn asked Luke.

She and her fellow refugees were escorting the young Jedi out the path through the rainforest, back to his shuttle craft.

"I would gladly turn over my leadership of this community to you," said the Sky Pilot, who had also accompanied them. "I am certain its people would be most willing to follow you."

"It's true," said the long-tailed one eagerly. "We would become your own faithful followers. Stay. You would have peace and freedom out here."

"Agreed," added the lavender-scaled being. "You are the true possessor of the spirit for which we have waited. You alone hold the secret. Allow us learn at your feet."

They reached the open airlock where the shuttle sat. Luke stopped here and looked to them.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't stay."

"Here is a whole new society of the faithful you could create," the Sky Pilot pointed out.

"I understand what you think you want," said Luke. "But I'm not one to be proselytizing the Force to others. I'm no Master. I don't really know yet if I'm even a true Jedi, or if I even want to be. I won't know until I go there."

"But you might never return," Aislinn said with concern

"He will," said the Sky Pilot with confidence. "He may not have full belief in his powers, but I do. He *is* a Jedi. And I hope that when he too feels secure in that identity, he will come and join with us, to lead us."

"When it's finished," said Luke, "once it's resolved, then I'll decide what I want to do. Until then I can't say anything to you but good-bye. May the Force be with you."

"May great peace and love go with you," said Aislinn earnestly. She stepped up to kiss him lightly on the cheek.

"I sense dark tendrils of dilemma entangling your soul," added the Sky Pilot. "I hope they may be dispelled by the light of the Force."

Storm thrust out a hand to Luke. "I too hope you get your answers, Skywalker," the ex-Imperial soldier said, now in a more accepting tone, "like I've found here."

"I envy you that," Luke told him sincerely. He took Storm's hand and they exchanged a warm handshake.

He stepped away into the lock, paused to wave back to them, then headed for the ship. As he climbed into the shuttle's hatch, the inner door of the airlock slid closed behind him.

The small gathering of the children of the Force watched as the outer door opened and the landing platform slid out of the dome's side. They continued to watch, regret in their eyes, as the shuttle lifted and flew away, back toward the salvage scow. And they were still watching some while later when the scow's engines fired and the square craft moved ahead, sailing away from the huge caravan of painted ships and out of sight.

"Come on, my friends," the Sky Pilot then said to the others. "Let us return to the center ring. There we can pray together for our young Jedi's success."

The light beam shot from the blaster's muzzle, missed the floating sphere of the remote target by a good distance, and ricocheted harmlessly from a control panel in the Millennium Falcon's lounge.

Leia sighed in frustration.

"No, Gowan," she said. "You're holding it too tight." She stepped to the man who stood with the weapon in hand, looking helpless. She adjusted his grip on its butt. "There. And don't *jerk* the trigger. Squeeeeeze it! Slow and steady. Okay? Ready?" She looked to the floating sphere, ordering, "Again, remote!"

The ball once more began to zig and zag around in the cabin, no more than two yards away from him.

He tried to get a bead on it. He fired.

The shot went wide again. It hit the edge of the doorway to the cockpit corridor just as Han Solo was coming through. The light bolt bounced away only inches from his face. He flinched back.

"Wow! Hey, watch it!" he cried, hands lifted in defense.

"It was just a target practice beam," she told him. "It can't hurt you."

"Oh. Sure. I knew that," he said quickly, straightening up and coming on in. "So, how's our boy doing?"

"Near to hopeless, I'm afraid," Leia told him.

"Well, I'm so sorry," Gowan said indignantly. "I did warn you."

"How 'bout the Senator?" asked Han, looking toward the older man who sat by watching Gowan's display with open amusement.

Valladian smiled. "I'll show you." He got up from his seat, took the blaster from Gowan, and assumed a shooter's stance, weapon ready. "Again, remote!" he ordered.

The metal sphere moved. So did the gun. Its beam zapped the remote five times in quick succession as it ducked around the room. Valladian lowered the blaster and looked to Han.

"Not bad for an old man, eh?" he said with a note of pride.

"Hey, not shabby for anyone," said an impressed Han. "Whaddaya think, Princey?" he asked Gowan.

Gowan growled in irritation but didn't answer.

"Well," said Han, "I gotta tell you all, we just passed the frontier. We're in the Unknown Regions now. Trouble is, how do we find Luke from here?" He looked to Leia. "Time for that next step, Sweetheart."

"I'm not sure I can tell you what it is," she said. "Let's go forward where I can see outside. Maybe that'll help."

"What about me?" asked Gowan.

"You keep practicing," she told him. "Senator, why don't *you* try and teach him?"

"My pleasure," he said. And, as Han and Leia went out, they heard Valladian begin the lesson in a lecturing tone. "All right, my boy, just relax now. Try to lead your target a little..."

"Think he'll ever catch on?" Han asked her as they went up the corridor.

She shook her head. "I doubt it. Well, maybe if a squad of stormtroopers stood right in front of him he might hit one."

"Or, maybe with his great diplomacy skills he can convince 'em to kill themselves," he suggested. "With a blaster I don't know if he'd be a bigger threat to them or us."

They came into the cockpit. Chewbacca was alone at the controls.

"Okay, Chewie, I'm back," said Han. "How's it goin'?"

The Wookiee gave a terse "all right" snarl.

"We're just stayin' on a straight heading right into it," Han explained to Leia as he settled into his seat. "But that ain't gonna get

us anywhere unless we're the luckiest fools in the galaxy. So, what about it, Leia? Where do you think we should we go?"

She dropped down onto a seat behind him, but she didn't reply.

After a minute, he repeated: "Anything?"

No answer.

"Leia," he said, looking around. "Leia?"

She sat stiffly on the seat, eyes open and staring fixedly ahead. She seemed almost to be in some form of trance.

Chewie turned and looked around at her too, then barked a question.

"Quiet," Han cautioned him. "I think she's got something."

He and the Wookiee watched her expectantly for several moments. At last she blinked and shook her head, coming back to life.

"Let me take the controls," she said determinedly to Han, standing and moving up to him.

"You wanna fly?" he said in surprise.

"If we want to find Luke," she said, "yes. I'll have to steer us by feel."

"You can feel him then?"

"Just faintly. And it comes and goes." She met his gaze with an oddly intense one. "Han, there's something else out there. Something big. Luke's headed for it."

"You sure?"

"Pretty sure. It's got to do with the Force, that much I can sense. I may not be able to stay with him, but I can certainly home in on it. It's almost like… I can hear it." She hesitated, struggling with the vague concept. "Like something *calling* me."

"Okay," he conceded, getting up from the pilot's chair and offering it to her. "What've we got to lose?"

"Luke!" she said grimly, settling into the seat.

"All right then," Captain Thatch said to his chief work droid he nicknamed Mack. "Just check the power converter and the primaries over good. Make sure there are no leaks. Can't afford to be losing any more energy."

"Aye, aye, Captain," the droid replied snappily, then turned and flashed out through the bridge door.

"Is there anything else I can do to help?" offered Luke. "I'm pretty good with engines."

"No," the Ewok said. "Not a good idea here. That H-K engine's getting pretty old. A bit too much loose radiation in that core for the likes of us. Leave it to Mack. He'll check it out all right. I don't think there's any damage. Still, I also didn't think the run-in with that cruiser would deplete the primary cells so far. Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for," Luke assured. "But, you're positive we can still make it safely... and get back?"

"The power generator will handle that easily, so long as we keep our speed at a quarter sublight. You're certain you wouldn't rather turn 'round and find a spot to recharge?"

"If we don't need to, yes I am," Luke said decisively. "It would take longer to do that then to go on, no matter how slow. Besides," he added, looking intently out into the space ahead, "I'm too close now. The pull of whatever's out there is very strong. I've got to find out what it is. I've got to get this finished."

"You'll have no argument from me, mate," said the Ewok. He consulted his navigational instrument readouts. "And you're right. We are getting close to that spot of yours. We've come near half the distance from that fleet of vagabonds to your coordinates." He looked

to Luke. "Are you certain you want me taking you all the way in now? What about this great secret you said it was?"

"It doesn't seem to be much of one anymore, does it?" Luke said. "No reason for you not to know about it too. But I have to go to the actual place by myself. It would be dangerous for you."

"I'm quite content to let you go alone," Thatch assured. "Well then, might as well settle back for a while and rest. He glanced at the rather tensed looking Luke and smiled. "Or, rest as much as you can, anyway."

"I can wait," said Luke, visibly forcing himself to relax. He even smiled a little in return. "After all, it's not like anyone's chasing me."

"High Admiral on the bridge!" a junior officer announced as Tharkus stepped onto the deck of the warship's control room.

"What is this news that drags me from my sleep, Captain?" he asked irritably, striding out to the front view-windows where Vaskor stood.

"I thought you'd want to know at once, Sir. We've completed the final calculations from the new data. We've pinpointed the exact location to which Skywalker is heading. I've had our own course plotted for it."

"Can we get to this spot in time?" demanded Tharkus.

"Most certainly we can now, Admiral. Of course we've only been able to use limited hyperdrive in this uncharted region of space. Our astrogation charts are vastly incomplete and the risk of collision is too great. Still, at sublight we should have no difficulty."

"Then make it so at once, Captain. Set course."

A junior officer approached to interrupt.

"Excuse me, Captain. We've picked up the blips of a great many ships. Hundreds in fact."

"Hundreds?" said Vaskor in surprise, turning to him. "Who are they?"

"We've no idea, Sir. The ships are mostly small, but quite densely packed. They've formed up in a screen right across our course. They'll be coming into visual range in a few seconds."

At that same moment, aboard the bioship, a loud voice was speaking up, echoing about in the dome from loudspeakers on all sides of it:

"Sky Pilot, are you there?"

The leader and a group of his followers seated at meditation in the central ring of stones looked up, their concentration broken. The Sky Pilot raised his voice to call back. "Yes. What is it?"

"Control room here. We've had word from some of the ships. Their sensors are picking up a vessel."

"Is it Skywalker's ship coming back?"

"No. Another one. Much larger. Wait, it looks like an Imperial Star Destroyer!"

"Star Destroyer?" said Storm. "Could they finally be coming in here after us?"

"Be calm," the Sky Pilot advised. "After so long ignoring us, why would they wish to do that now? The war has ended, remember?"

"Perhaps then it is an emissary of the new peace," the long-tailed one suggested.

"Shall we have the ships scatter?" the voice from the speakers asked.

"No," said the leader. "As children of peace, I think we should meet them."

On the Star Destroyer, Tharkus was now peering ahead through the bridge window. The sparkling dots of the many ships were now becoming visible against the black, so thick they seemed like a summer night's swarm of fireflies.

"Order a full stop, Captain," he ordered. "Let's not do anything rash."

At Vaskor's command, the Star Destroyer slowed to hang dead in space. They were close enough to the strange fleet for individual ships to be discerned now, and Tharkus stared out at the gaudily painted craft curiously.

"Why are they marked that way?" he asked. "Have we stumbled into a restricted zone for the insane?" He pointed out the flower-shaped one right ahead. "Look at that monstrosity. Wholly unsuited for deep-space."

"Message coming in, High Admiral," said an officer at the communications console.

Tharkus and the captain stepped to him. They listened as a voice came over the speaker:

"Hello, Imperial ship. We welcome you in the name of the new peace."

"New peace?" said Vaskor. "What would they know of that?"

"Skywalker," said Tharkus with certainty. "He must have been here. He must have told them."

"His vessel's not with them, Sir," the captain pointed out.

"No. He's gone on and left this barrier in our path. But just who are they? There could certainly be more than enough firepower on a fleet that size to give us a hot fight."

As if in direct answer to his concerns, the voice spoke again: "Imperial ship, please respond. You have entered a realm that is not

part of the Empire or Alliance. You will not be harmed. Those of us who live here are conscientious objectors from across the galaxy, seeking only to live in peace."

"Why they're damned shirkers," Tharkus declared. "Cowards hiding away out here. Now they think they can come to us and beg our understanding?"

"Sensor reports coming in, High Admiral," said another officer. "They are unarmed."

"What, all of them?" asked an unbelieving Tharkus.

"Yes sir. We can't detect a single weapon on any ship."

"Impossible!"

"No sir. There are some which would likely have carried armaments, but even they have none. It seems likely they were stripped."

"Pacifistic fools," Tharkus spat out contemptuously. "They've left themselves defenseless."

"Imperial ship, we welcome you," the voice came again, "if you've come in peace. Otherwise, we recommend that you depart back to Imperial Space."

"Captain," the high admiral said tersely, "we've no time to waste here. Wipe that useless vermin from our way!"

On the bioship, the Sky Pilot and the group of his followers with him looked out through the dome to the stationary wedge of the big battleship.

"Something's wrong," said Storm uneasily. "They're still not acknowledging our transmissions,"

"I... I feel something dark from them," said his leader, looking to the ex-warrior in alarm. "Storm, they're not here for peace. They

mean to destroy us! They're are after Luke... after the Force itself. Get our ships out of there!"

"Control room here," the amplified voice boomed across the dome in its urgency. "Sky Pilot, they're bringing weapons to bear!"

"Control room," shouted Storm, "tell all the ships to..."

The intended warning was too late. A torrent of fire erupted from the man-of-war as all its batteries unleashed a simultaneous salvo.

The bolts of emerald turbolaser fire flashed into the mass of ships packed so close together that almost every shot was a hit. A score of the painted craft exploded, some taking out others close by with their swelling balls of flame and debris.

The warship's fire continued furiously. The small ships, taken off guard, stayed put for fatal, long moments as more and more were hit. The whole zone of space became a brilliant fireworks display of bursting fireballs.

On the bioship they looked up through the dome in horror at the chaos all around them.

"Why are they doing this?" the Sky Pilot cried out in agony. "We wouldn't have harmed them. My people. My children..."

Overcome by the shock, he dropped to his knees.

"Sky Pilot, we can't stay here," Storm called to him, with no effect. He dragged the man up and shook him, trying to get through. "Sky Pilot, we've got to get way!"

"I was mad," the broken man said, heedless of him. "I was mad to think that there could ever be any peace with them."

A turbolaser beam slammed into an outer petal. It took out the entire segment in a single explosion, sending a dense plume of container shards and shredded foliage spurting away. The stricken

vessel was sent spinning wildly, careening through the rest of the fleet out of control.

Another of its petals sliced into a small ship, ripping away the section's end as it destroyed the vessel. Atmosphere, plants, ground, water, animals—all were sucked away.

The broken blossom of the bioship spun on, sweeping out of the fire zone and away into the black.

Behind it, the rest of the ships still able were finally scattering. They shot away in all directions, leaving the debris and broken hulks of hundreds of vessels drifting in space.

The batteries of the man-of-war fired on for a time, methodically blasting any ships which still looked intact into blazing particles. Then they fell silent.

"All targets still within range have been destroyed, Sir," Captain Vaskor reported to his high admiral on the bridge.

"Very good," Tharkus told him. "Did any of them escape?"

"A few dozen, Sir. No more."

"No matter," the high-admiral told him haughtily. "Their time will come too, Vaskor. When we control the galaxy, we will not leave one of such weak-minded beings alive. Now, take us ahead, Captain," he ordered. "We have a rendezvous."

CHAPTER 26

The Millennium Falcon picked its way carefully through the wide-scattered field of blasted ships and drifting debris.

"Luke certainly didn't do this!" said Leia, still at the Falcon's controls.

"No," said Han from the co-pilot's seat. He was consulting their sensor readouts on the wrecks. "This whole bunch couldn't have been much of a threat. From the scans I'd say most of 'em were pretty small ships. Whatever did this had 'em way outgunned!"

In the seat behind him, Chewbacca gave a sharp bark and pointed out the window on the right.

"What's that, Chewie?" said Han, peering out. "Oh yeah. There's somethin' a lot bigger over there. Leia, go that way. But, be careful."

She skillfully guided the ship through the obstacle course of debris, closing in on the spot. As they drew close they could see that it was a large, blossom-shaped craft with a clear dome at its center. Two of the petal- like outer sections had been badly damaged. Several others were cracked or had fragments torn away.

Around this wounded craft clustered a few score of other, small, brightly-painted ships, looking most forlorn now. They were the only survivors of the once-huge refugee fleet. At the approach of the Falcon, many of these fled abruptly like startled fish. A few boldly stood by the larger ship.

"Who are you?" a suspicious man's voice snapped from the communications speaker.

"Take it easy there," Han replied. "We're friends. What the hell happened to you?"

"We were hit by an Imperial Star Destroyer," the voice said.

"Star Destroyer?" Han said, exchanging an alarmed glance with Leia.

"They attacked for no reason," the angry voice went on. "We were harmless. We thought there was an armistice."

"Sorry, pal," said Han regretfully. "Not today. But who are you and why are you way out here?"

"We came here to escape the war," the man replied, giving a short laugh of irony. "Funny, huh? My name is Storm."

The speaker was now in the bioship's main dome, responding to Han's voice over the comm system as he looked out toward the hovering Falcon. At the same time he was kneeling beside the form of the Sky Pilot.

The elderly man, seemingly asleep, lay with his head cradled in Aislinn's lap. A few other survivors of their group stood watching or tended to fellow beings hurt in the attack. The bodies of several more had been placed in a neat row.

Most of the damage here had been done by the violent spinning the bioship had gone through. Much had been torn loose and hurled around. Two of the large center trees were canted over sharply. A third had been cast down. And damage to the integrity of the big ship itself was made evident by the ominous creaks and groanings of its stressed structural members.

"Look, Storm, we'd like to help you," came Han's voice, "but we've kinda got an urgent job of our own. Maybe even *more* urgent now. This Star Destroyer, you don't know where it was going, do you?"

"Our leader thinks it was following someone named Luke."

"That's what I was afraid of. See, this Luke, he's our friend. We came here to help him. Do you know where he's gone?"

"No," said Storm. "He came and he left. I've no idea where he went."

"Storm," called a weak voice.

He looked down to see that the Sky Pilot was awake, though very weak. The older man's skin was pale and his breath rasped in his throat.

"Rest," Storm advised. "You're pretty broken up inside."

"It... doesn't matter... now," the man gasped out. "They are friends of... of the Jedi. They must be helped."

"We *can't* help them," said Storm. "We've got to see to you, repair the bioship, save what ecosystems we still can."

The Sky Pilot shook his head. "No," he said in a faltering but still firm voice. "Not important...now. The whole galaxy is at stake. All... life. Mu...must...help."

His body went suddenly limp, his head falling back on Aislinn's lap. She bowed her head over him and wept.

Storm gently folded the dead leader's hands upon his chest. Then he arose, speaking out resolutely to Han:

"Luke headed to a planet strong in the Force. It's not far from here. If you mean to save your friend, we will help you."

"In that floating pinwheel?" Han's voice replied skeptically. "Sorry friend. You're unarmed and pretty damaged. Best thing for you is just to save yourselves. Good Luck. We're all gonna need it."

With that, the Millennium Falcon moved ahead, sweeping around the bioship and heading on into the sector.

Storm watched it vanish from sight. Then he looked down to Aislinn.

"You and the rest have got to evacuate," he told her.

She turned her tear-streaked face up to him. "What about you?"

His face hardened in grim resolution. "I'm going after them."

"Almost there?" asked Luke, coming back onto the Entrepreneur's bridge with R2-D2 behind him.

"Any minute," the Ewok replied. "Get any more sleep this time?"

"No. I'm too keyed up," said Luke, shaking his head in a troubled way. "And I just can't forget that strange, sharp feeling I had a few hours ago. It was like voices screaming out to me. Like something was grabbing and shaking my brain. And that sudden sense of dread! It's still with me."

"A nightmare, most likely," Thatch said dismissingly. "Your mind playing tricks. It's natural the whole thing's getting to you."

"Maybe," Luke said, still with some uncertainty. "I have been feeling the Force so strongly. I suppose its power could be confusing things."

"Especially now," said the Ewok, pointing ahead. "We're here."

The salvage scow was just sailing in a wide curve past a smallish yellow sun and swinging in toward a single planet that hung in space beyond it. From a nondescript grayish pebble it swiftly grew and resolved to what looked like a gleaming marble of blue swirled across with white.

As they came yet closer, the true nature of the planet could be seen.

"Angorathea," Luke breathed in awe, all other concerns forgotten. "At last!"

"Looks to me like you might have just a bit of trouble landing there, mate," was Captain Thatch's more practical comment.

For Angorathea appeared to be a water planet.

Nearly all of the world's surface was covered by a single great sea of deep blue-green. It was a smooth and clean and sparkling surface, save where the lines of moving white clouds and the grayer bands of storm fronts marked it in swirling abstract designs.

At first those observing from the approaching salvage scow saw no signs of land. But as the vessel swept in and around the globe, one small patch of brown and green came into view.

"There's something," declared Luke excitedly. "Put her into orbit above that."

The Ewok readily obeyed, and soon the square craft was drifting high above the single spot as the two scrutinized it carefully with both eyes and instruments.

The area below was an island of nearly circular shape. Indeed, it was so close to a perfect circle that it seemed unlikely for nature alone to have been the creator. It appeared to be constructed mostly of rock, trusting up for a uniform height above sea level, completely flat on top. There was no vegetation visible except for a ragged fringe of green around the shore line.

But the unusual appearance of the land was eclipsed by the construction which sat upon it.

It looked to be part massive fortress and part maze. A thick outer rampart rose a hundred feet high and formed a ring miles around. Within the space enclosed were several other concentric bands of wall, each of these broken at irregular intervals around its circumference by openings. This created a vast labyrinth about a single, central feature.

From high overhead that feature appeared a quite primitive artifact. Its construction was simple. Four huge, flat slabs of stone had been upended, with another larger one laid over the top as a roof. Surrounding this structure, and forming the inmost ring of the entire complex, was a circle of twelve tall and monolithic stones.

"Just like the Sky Pilot's ring," Luke murmured to himself as he looked at this. "He must have sensed the shape. The Heart must be there."

"Heart?" said Thatch.

"That's the name of the place where I'm supposed to go," Luke said vaguely, still preserving the secret of the Heart's power. "It's got to be down there."

"Well, it's safe enough for you to go there, planet-wise," said Thatch, consulting his instruments. "Breathable atmosphere. Nothing poisonous in the water. Not even any dangerous beasts or plants. Only sea-life, so far as I can tell." He peered down again at the huge structure. "Wonder what became of the ones who built that thing."

"I have a feeling they never lived here," said Luke. "Well, I might as well go down."

Behind him, R2-D2 squeaked and whistled to get his attention.

"What, Artoo?" he said. "No, I don't want you to go. I don't want you to get hurt."

At this the little droid tootled and bleeped adamantly. There was no mistaking its ire.

"What'd he say then?" asked the Ewok.

"That if I'm going to be killed, then he's going to get killed too. He is coming along this time, and I can't stop him."

"Remarkably strong streak of stubbornness for a machine," Thatch observed.

"Yes. And of friendship too. I guess he's earned the right to have his way." He patted the droid. "Okay, Artoo. You come along. And, thanks."

Within minutes afterward the scow's shuttle was sailing down toward the planet, this time with the droid beside Luke as he piloted them in.

"There seems to be one beach-like area," Luke noted as they dropped closer to the island. "Down over there, on the south side. It's the only place that looks different. And look! I think there are ships parked there. Better check that first."

He spiraled the shuttle in and brought it to a gentle touchdown just above the sands of a wide beach. He and Artoo went out of the craft and stood, looking around.

They looked inland first. Some two hundred yards across a stretch of the brownish rock loomed the high, curved, outer wall of the structure. From where they were it seemed to be unbroken. Between it and the beach were scattered half a dozen other small space craft. From the heavy weathering effects on their outer hulls, they were clearly long abandoned.

"Must be the ships of the other ones the Pilot told us about," said Luke.

He turned to look at the beach. It was both wide and deep, sloping gradually down to the lapping waves. Its pink-white sands were very fine and absolutely pristine. No speck of refuse, no smear of oil, not even a footprint marred it.

"Well, I'll sure bet there's no civilized world with a beach this clean," he said. "Thatch was right. Nobody could be living here, Artoo."

A sudden, high, chattering sort of sound caught his attention. His eyes went to its source. Something had broken surface in the waves just off the shore. And it appeared to be some kind of head.

The head jerked rapidly up and down, and he heard more chattering. Though it was only unintelligible noise, Luke found the sense of it sounding in his head like spoken words.

"Welcome to Angorathea," came clearly to him in soft, polite, cultivated tones.

"I understand you," Luke said aloud to the head.

More chattering came from it, and he heard: "Of course you can. The power field here allows for that, but only for ones such as you."

Luke strode down the beach to the water's edge. He looked curiously out at the creature. He could see from there that the head was smooth and rounded, covered with shiny, grey-blue skin. Tiny dark eyes showed on each side of a long, blunt snout. A lipless mouth beneath it stretched back and up in what seemed a grin, showing him rows of small teeth. Then it spoke again.

"It has been long since anyone has come here," Luke heard. "You have the Force strong in you."

"Who are you?" he asked.

"See," it said.

It suddenly vanished, but a moment later reappeared, shooting up full from the water in a spectacular leap. A sleek, fishlike body glinted in the sun. Luke glimpsed the broad tail, side flippers, and top

dorsal fin which were its propulsion. Then it splashed back into the waves.

"I and my kind are the sole intelligent denizens of this world," it explained after its head surfaced again. "We have been here since its creation. We have grown with it, affected by the power focused here. The Force is part of us now, as we are part of it."

"Did you build that?" Luke asked, waving back toward the structure.

"The Temple of the Heart? No. It was the first of the Je'daii who did that long ago. We build nothing, nor do we need to. We live at one with the sea. It supplies all our needs. We have no interest in the land."

"But you know why I'm here," he said.

"Of course. You seek the Heart for answers, as so many others have before you."

"Can you tell me how those others got in?"

"Only your own heart can open the doorway for you. If that heart is enough attuned to the one which beats within the ring, you will win your way inside. If not..."

"I'll fail," Luke finished. "Do you know what happens to those who fail?"

"No. They come. Some we talk to. They go to the temple. Some even manage to get inside. We have observed that the portal remains open after they enter. We believe that it stays so for as long as they stay alive. Sometimes it closes soon after they go in. Sometimes it takes days. But the door always closes eventually, leaving them inside."

"What about those who succeed?" Luke asked. "I mean, does anyone ever come back out?"

"Once there were many of those who entered and returned. Those with the Force strong in them. But such have not visited in many years. Only those who have failed. Their craft from space litter the shore, as you see."

"There was a war," Luke explained. "Most of the Jedi are dead."

"Yes, that we have been told."

Luke contemplated the temple and the abandoned ships again, then looked back to the creature. "I don't suppose you can tell me why it is they didn't just *fly* in there."

"That I do know. As it was created, the Temple's great energies create a shield above it that no mortal power can penetrate. There is but one way in, and only a true Jedi will can find it."

"I guess it's my turn to try," he said. "Thank you for your help."

"I will wait and hope for your success," it replied.

Luke walked back up the beach to the rocky ground where the droid waited.

"Come on, Artoo," he told it, and marched determinedly toward the temple, the droid rolling behind.

He reached the high, blank wall. He ran a hand across the stone. It seemed somehow to be composed of a single, unbroken piece. No faintest crack, no hidden hinge, no tiniest mark of any kind hinted at a door.

"First problem, Artoo," said Luke. "How do we get in there?"

The chattering of the sea creature, sharp and urgent this time arose behind him. He looked around to see that it was leaping high out of the water, as if to attract him. Then it suddenly darted away, diving beneath the waves and vanishing completely.

In the place where it had been, something peculiar was happening.

Bubbles rose to the surface in swiftly growing quantities, until they roiled to a white froth. Then something broke through the water, rising upward into view as the waves fell away on all sides.

The object lifted thirty feet of its form clear of the sea to reveal a vast, rounded back, like that of a mechanized turtle with an armored shell of metal plates. From its front end protruded a broad, head-like section, squared off and angular. The twin barrels of a turbolaser turret protruded from the top of its flat skull. The bulging eyes on the head's sides were the windows of the machine's control compartment. Figures could be seen behind them, peering out. They wore black uniforms and helmets.

"An Imperial Swimmer!" gasped Luke.

He looked to his ship. It was now closer to the heavily armed Imperial monster than to him. He looked left and right, checking desperately for another avenue of escape.

From around the curve of wall on either side charged a squad of stormtroopers to surround him, their blasters at the ready.

"All right, rebel," one snarled, "drop the weapons. No tricks, or you'll be shredded."

Luke looked around at the bristling wall of guns defiantly and crouched, fingers near his weapons as if ready to fight. But the impossibility of success against such odds decided him otherwise. With a sigh of resignation he straightened, slowly loosened his belt, and let it fall.

Another trooper scooped it up.

"Now," said the first one, prodding Luke roughly with the butt of his rifle, "down to the shore."

With men close behind him and at the sides, Luke was herded down across the sand to the water's edge. He was halted there.

The modified, submersible AT-AT Luke had called a "Swimmer" sat just offshore, its broad head hanging close above the surf. Luke gazed up toward it, his expression one of curiosity over what was to happen now.

He hadn't long to wait. A hatch on the head's top cracked and swung wide open. A figure emerged, climbing up to stand on a small platform high atop the crown. It was a tall man of haughty demeanor clad in an officer's uniform. He stared down at the helpless figure of Luke with a grin of supercilious triumph.

"Well, *Jedi*." He made the word sound like something obscene. "So we have found you at last."

"Who are you?" Luke demanded.

"My name is High Admiral Tharkus," he supplied.

"And just what are you doing, High Admiral?" asked Luke. "There's supposed to be a truce."

Tharkus gave a condescending laugh. "Poor boy. I'm afraid that little hope of yours has been doomed... by me. And, once I have finished here, the Alliance will be finished as well. Of course, for that we should thank you. After all, you led us to this place."

"Led?" Luke repeated in disbelief. "No. That's impossible. You couldn't have followed me."

"How naïve you are," Tharkus said, shaking his head. "Of course we could. With a bit of help."

He gestured down at the open hatch. A second figure emerged, its furry ears and broad head appearing first, then the chubby bear-like form as it clambered up onto the platform.

"Thatch?" Luke said in shock.

The Ewok figure spread its arms. Instantly, an azure glow rose around it, obscuring its squat shape in a bright cocoon of absorbed energy. Within the light, the shadowy form grew elastic, stretching taller, growing thin.

Seconds later the light was fading. A scrawny humanoid of translucent flesh and blue-white coloring now stood there. He smiled down at Luke.

"My real name is Pollux," the being said.

CHAPTER 27

A turbolaser bolt burst against the outer wall of the Jedi temple.

It came from one of two squat portable weapons that had been set up near the wall. Crews of specially armored stormtroopers were directing individual shots against the stone under the direction of General Kantos.

He stepped up to examine the wall after the last shot. Though it was seemingly constructed of ordinary rock, no slightest chip or scorch mark indicated that the massive energy impact had had an effect.

He shook his head and stepped back to the crew. "Still nothing. Try a bit higher," he instructed. "And boost the power."

Down on the shore, standing below the looming head of the AT-AT Swimmer, Tharkus watched the work with Luke and the being called Pollux. A dozen more stormtroopers stood around the young Jedi with ready guns. The high admiral was taking no chances.

"I can't believe you were the Ewok," a still-dazed Luke said to the blue-tinged being.

"And a jawa, and a warrior of the Sand People, and even one of your own pilots," the strange man added with some glee. "Oh, it's all manner of things I've become in my pursuit of you. Quite a challenge you were. One of the best I've ever had."

There was another explosion at the temple as a new laser bolt went home.

"A shapeshifter." Luke examined the translucent skin with its visible arteries and the purple mass of the heart pumping within the narrow chest. "I've known one of your kind before."

"Perhaps, but I doubt you've met the Dioskouroi," Tharkus commented. "Very rare, though very useful beings they've been to me over the years. Never so much as now."

"What happened to Captain Thatch?" Luke asked Pollux. "Or was there ever one?"

"Alas, yes, poor fellow," Pollux said with mock regret. "I desperately needed a way to follow you from Tatooine. I was afraid I'd lose you then. You were in such a hurry to get a ship and leave."

"Too reckless," Luke muttered, angry with himself. "Yoda was right."

"What was that?" asked the being, not clearly hearing this.

"I say I was foolhardy to do it that way," Luke told him. "Rushing off alone."

"But it turned out well for me," Pollux gloated. "While you waited for your sporter to be prepped, I hunted swiftly through the port for some way to follow. Then the salvage ship with its droid crew popped up. It was ideal. I realized I could stay with you best by having you *with* me. So I took on the jawa's guise to sabotage your ship. I'm expert in that. I then used the scow to rescue you. All quite easy. My masterstroke was to make Thatch an Ewok."

"He wasn't one?"

"No. Humanoid, like you. But a coarse and nasty type. Not suitable at all. I had to gain your trust at once, you see. I thought, what creature more loveable, more helpful, more sincere that a furry little Ewok? Especially for you, their friend. And, it worked. A fine role for me," he added pridefully. "One of the best impersonations I've ever done."

"Diabolical, isn't he?" said a pleased Tharkus.

A turbolaser fired again. The sound of the explosion was yet louder this time as Kantos cranked up the weapon's power.

"But I don't understand why you destroyed that patrol ship," said Luke. "You wiped out hundreds of your own men."

"A necessary sacrifice," the being said dismissingly. "You see, I was actually the one who signaled them to stop us. I had to secure your fullest trust to ensure that you would let me bring you on here." He grinned. "What better way to prove my loyalty to you? The noble little Ewok, risking himself to fight the Empire."

"Then you're a murderer," Luke said in revulsion.

"I'm a soldier," Pollux retorted. "I do what I have to do to win. That is the only rule in war."

"So I suppose all the others beings you've impersonated have died too."

"Not always. Only when I've had to assume an existing identity. And don't be too disgusted by my ability, Jedi," he added indignantly. "It saved *you* several times. Without that man in the Mos Eisley bar the troopers would have had you. Without that most accommodating bantha, you would have lost your head."

"The bantha? That was you too?"

"As I told you," Tharkus said, "the devious talents of these beings are immeasurable. He even managed a way to slow you down so that we could beat you here."

A much louder blast drew all their eyes back to the wall.

"Ah," said the high admiral, "they are upping the power yet more. They should break through very soon." He looked to Luke. "It seems we've no more use for you, Jedi."

"Are you so sure it'll be that easy?" Luke challenged.

"Of course," Tharkus answered. "This one obstacle can't stop us now. The Force will soon cease to aid the Alliance, and so will you."

"What then?"

"Then I will take delight in crushing your so-called *New Republic* and making the Empire the sole power in the galaxy again."

"With yourself it's new Emperor?" Luke shrewdly guessed.

Tharkus eyed him piercingly. "Why not?" he boldly said. "Once I had no such grand ambition for myself. But the idea has been growing stronger as I've grown closer to success."

Twin blasts hit the wall this time as both turbolasers fired. Kantos went to examine the effect. He then strode down to join them on the beach.

"I don't know what that wall's made of," he told Tharkus, "but those turbolasers don't have the power to break through."

"Recommendations," snapped the high admiral.

"That we try the bigger guns on the submersible."

"Very well," said Tharkus. "See it done."

Kantos went up a ramp lowered from the bottom of the machine's head section, vanishing inside. Soon after the huge guns thrusting out over Luke and the others shifted position to bear squarely on the wall. The troopers still before the section hastily moved themselves and the portable guns out of the way.

One of the big turbolasers fired. Its powerful bolt flashed in, struck the wall and simply bounced away! It ricocheted nearly straight back toward its source, slamming into the beach not far from the machine. Those gathered before it were showered with sand as the impact dug a wide crater.

Kantos poked his head out through the hatch above, looking a bit sheepish.

"Ah... sorry, High Admiral," he said contritely.

"Never mind that," Tharkus rapped out in frustration. "Was the turbolaser at the highest power setting?"

"Yes, Sir. It appears the wall has some type of force shield capable of deflecting even full-energy bolts."

Tharkus contemplated the temple. "Then never mind the wall. We'll go in from above. Send up a fighter to scout the way."

In moments a large door was sliding open at the apex of the submersible's metal shell. A TIE fighter was lifted up by its repulsorlift drive from the bay beneath. When high enough, it activated main engines and screamed away.

It soared around and over the temple several times in examination. Finally it stopped, hovered a moment, and dropped slowly down toward the interior.

But some twenty feet above the top of the temple's wall, the ship suddenly rebounded as if from a solid surface. The ship bounced back upward, momentarily out of control. The pilot recovered, lifted, flew around to another spot and tried again.

With the same result.

The next time, at the high admiral's command, the TIE fighter strafed the temple several times from above. The shower of laser bolts was deflected by an invisible barrier in every place tested.

"Another energy shield of some kind," Tharkus growled.

"I guess it won't be so easy after all," Luke said with a smile.

This drew Tharkus' hard gaze to the young man. "It seems we still need you after all," he said darkly.

"For what?" Luke asked.

"To take us in, of course."

Luke laughed outright. "Do you really think I'll help you?"

"I think you will... eventually," Tharkus said in an ominous way. "It just takes the correct persuasion." He signaled the stormtroopers. "Seize him!" he brusquely ordered.

The soldiers swiftly closed in around Luke.

The Millennium Falcon came into the planet's atmosphere on the far side of the orbiting Star Destroyer. It shot straight down and turned to skim close above the water, all but slicing through the crests.

"I only got a quick look before we ducked out of sight," explained Han, now piloting the ship across the wavetops. "I think there was some kind of landing party on the south side of that one island. So we come in from the north and hope they don't notice us."

"Sounds risky," said Leia.

"You gotta better choice?" he countered.

She shook her head.

Around the watery curve of the planet the Falcon soared at high speed, finally picking up the line of land ahead.

He slowed as they approached it. Here the shore line was uniformly steep. He flew on in, dropping the ship down on the rocky ground beyond.

The landing ramp dropped and Han ventured out, blaster in hand. An armed Leia followed. They looked carefully around. There was only the barren island, the empty sea, and the temple's high wall inland.

"Looks safe enough," he said.

"Of course it is," she said. "They're there. We're here. The question is, how do *we* get *there*?"

"Walk?" he suggested.

"All those miles around? On this ground? Do you know how many hours that would take? If they've got Luke, he may not have th e time."

"Would you prefer just taking the Falcon in and warning them we're coming? Surprise is our only chance."

"I know," she said in exasperation. "But there must be some other way."

A chattering noise from the water drew their attention to it. A sleek, bottle-nosed head was thrust above the waves, moving excitedly.

"Looks like there's life her after all," Han said. "A big fish. What's it doing?"

"I... I think it's trying to speak to us," she said. "It's almost as if I can hear words in my head."

"Some kind of telepath then…"

"Yes. It's got something to do with the Force here. I can tell that much. I think it creates some kind of mental link between those tuned in to it. But my skills aren't strong enough. The voice is too faint and far away to understand."

"It said, 'Hello. Welcome to Angorathea,'" said another voice from behind them.

They turned back toward the ship to see C-3PO coming down the ramp. The droid had been reassembled and was walking again, if even a bit more stiffly than usual. Chewie accompanied him.

"Threepio!" Leia said with delight. "You're together again. Can you understand what it said?"

"Certainly. I am fluent in over six million forms of communication," it droned mechanically. "This speech is a variation of that used by the Great Whaladons of Iskalon."

"Sorry," said Leia, her momentary joy fading at the impersonal sound of the voice. "I forgot he's only a walking computer now. For a second..."

"Never mind," said Han as Chewie helped the droid out over the rough ground to them. "He's still useful to us. Threepio, talk to the fish. Ask it if it knows anything about Luke Skywalker."

But before the droid could ask, the creature gave vent to a long, emphatic speech.

"It says I have no need to convey your words to her," Threepio translated. "She can understand your speech and knows we are friends, as she can sense the Force in the Princess Leia and somewhat read her thoughts. She understands you are Luke Skywalker's sister and offers its help."

"Pretty smart fish," Han said, impressed.

"Then, does it..." she began to the droid, then turned to the creature, "I mean, do *you* know where Luke is?"

The telepath gave another long reply.

"She says that a large metal monster filled with beings of both black and white have seized him on the opposite side of the island," the droid passed on.

"Damn!" said Han. "So the Empire's already got him."

"This being herself did not see him," Threepio continued to translate, "but it does know what happened. It shares a collective conscience with the rest of its species. All are one in the Force."

"What's going on here?" This came from Gowan. He and Valladian were now out of the ship and approaching the rest. The younger man looked at the creature with a raised eyebrow. "What is it?" he asked uncertainly.

The being chattered a reply.

"This is a *she*, Sir," the droid informed him, "not an *it*. She says that she is of the Lazhuwan."

"Ah. So the being speaks," said Valladian.

"And *she's* smarter than Gowan," Han added, drawing a glare from the prince.

"She's already told us that Luke is a captive on the island's far side," said Leia.

"Yeah," said Han. "We've gotta get around there and rescue him."

"Great," said Leia. "Except we still don't know how."

The sea creature chattered away again.

"She says that perhaps her tribe can help us," the droid translated.

"How?" asked Han. "Can they fight?"

She responded.

"They have always been a peaceful race," Threepio explained. "They have no weapons, nor any intention to use violence. Still, they are willing to do what they can."

"Ok, like what?"

"For one thing, they can move very much faster by sea than you can by land. They might carry you around to a point near the Imperial force."

"Carry?" Han repeated skeptically. "You mean we ride on their backs or something?"

"We could do it," said Leia.

"*You* could do it," Gowan told her. "Not me!"

She looked at him, and then the realization hit her. "You're frightened, aren't you?"

"Me?" he began blusteringly. Then he hesitated and signed. "So, I am," he admitted. "I mean, well... I can't swim! Okay?"

She suppressed a smile, saying with assurance, "Believe me, I understand that, but I don't think they'll let you drown."

"Maybe not. But what about your droid?" he countered. "He probably can't take the water. And then there's the Senator? And it would take a herd of the Lazhuwan to keep the Wookiee afloat."

"He may be right in what he says," put in Valladian. "Although I hate to admit it, I'm not as strong as I once was."

The creature chattered away once again.

"She asks if you have any type of device which might support you safely upon the waters," said the droid.

"Huh?" said Han.

"She means a boat," Leia supplied.

He shrugged. "Sure, we've got a couple little inflatable rafts. But they're just for flotation purposes if we have to ditch on water. No motors or anything."

The sea creature responded enthusiastically to that.

"She says that will be satisfactory," said the droid, "so long as you also have some means for pulling them."

"Chewie, get some rope," Han ordered. "Gowan, you help me with the rafts."

He turned for the ship. Behind him the being spoke again.

"Oh, and Master Solo," the droid called after him.

He looked back. "Yeah?"

"She says to tell you that she is *not* a *fish*!"

"Whoooweee!" Han said exuberantly as a blast of spray hit him across the face. "It's like the time I rode the Sea-Dragons of Drexel! Invigorating, ain't it?"

"*Wet* is what it is," Gowan said miserably.

The two men and Leia sat in one of two small, inflatable boats. She sat up in front with Han, also seeming to enjoy the ride, while Gowan cowered behind. Beside them a second raft held Valladian, Chewie, and the droid.

Both rafts were being drawn along at a very brisk clip, skimming across the waves. Their propulsion came from some fifty of the sleek, powerful sea beings who held onto ropes with their mouths to drag the craft along.

"I had a speedboat on Tagoria once," Han said. "Never went so fast as this."

They slammed across a high crest. Water splashed into the boat.

"I'm getting wetter," Gowan complained.

"Hang on Chewie," Han called to the other boat. "Be sure that the Perfesser don't bounce out."

The Wookiee took a tighter grip on the droid. Beside him, Valladian seemed to be enjoying the ride as well.

"I haven't had so much fresh air in ages," the senator called back.

They sped on around the curved coast of the island for some while before the creatures' pace slowed and they turned in. Not long after, the inflatable boats were bumping against the rocky shore.

Several of the obliging beings held the boats in place with their noses while the passengers clambered onto the land. Chewie hauled Threepio out bodily and set him upright.

One of the creatures made a long speech to them.

"He says that the Imperial force is not far ahead," the droid reported. "We must be careful from here. They will stay about to watch and render assistance if they can."

"'He?'" said Han. "That's not the same one as before?"

"No, Master," Threepio told him. "But it doesn't matter. Their minds are all interconnected, as I said."

"Well, thanks," Han said to the creature. "Although I don't know what else you can do to help."

It made a reply.

"He says you might wish to hurry, Sir," said Threepio. "It appears Master Skywalker may be in some distress."

Han turned to his companions.

"All right, folks, looks like this is it," he said grimly. "We'll move on and scout out the situation. Everybody got their weapons?"

All save the droid showed him a blaster, Gowan most reluctantly.

"Then, let's go."

As they started away, the sea beings submerged and vanished. The odd little band of would-be rescuers was left alone to make its way along the rocky coast.

When they caught first sight of the Imperial Swimmer looming from the sea, they went prone amidst the rocks. They crawled forward cautiously to where they could observe the beach.

Below the head of the metal monster was a large-sized group. A solid ring of stormtroopers enclosed a circular area. Inside it were some black uniformed men. One of them—a pudgy, elderly man with grey goatee and thinning hair—was attaching wires from a squat

machine to the extremities of a figure hung suspended between two poles.

The figure was Luke Skywalker.

"Oh no!" gasped Leia. "What are they doing to him?"

"Mind transmogrify," the voice of Threepio droned, his round eyes fixed on the familiar form attaching the wires. "The doctor there is very good at that."

"We have to stop it," Leia said anxiously. "I can feel Luke's rising anxiety."

"Strategy first, sweetheart," Han told her. "We can't just charge into a hundred of 'em. Why don't you and Gowan and the senator try to get around and open fire from the other side? Chewie and I'll sneak in and get him. Simple."

"Not a good idea," Gowan said with conviction. "It can't work."

"You an expert now?" Han asked him. "Why can't it?"

Gowan shifted his blaster's muzzle to touch the side of Leia's head.

"Because if any of you try anything at all, I'm afraid I will have to shoot her," he told them.

CHAPTER 28

The rotund little man completed hooking up wires to Luke and moved back to his sinister bank of equipment.

"Doctor," said Tharkus, observing the preparations, "you are quite certain this... ah... *device* of yours will not kill him outright?"

"It should not do so," the man absently replied, fiddling with dials and levers.

"*Should* not? What do you mean?"

The doctor looked up to him. "Oh, well, the humanoid-adapted version of my mental transmogrifier has not actually been tested yet on an organic being. I have been seeking a proper subject." He looked to Luke in glee. "This one should be perfect. Such strong will."

"Yes, well it will avail me nothing if you destroy him in breaking that will, Doctor," Tharkus said doubtfully.

"At lower power levels it will certainly not do that," the other assured. "Some minor cell damage, maybe. A few burst small capillaries. Nothing crippling."

"And at higher levels?"

"If his resistance is strong enough to require them... well, yes there is more danger."

"I don't know about this," Tharkus said with yet more doubt.

"What other choice is there, High Admiral?" asked Kantos. "No ordinary means will overcome a Jedi's powers."

Tharkus sighed in reluctant acceptance. "Very well." He waved the doctor on. "Proceed."

The doctor smiled with pleasure. He eagerly snapped a switch. The hum of rising power sounded from the machine.

Tharkus stepped close to Luke. "You heard all that," he said. "We will not relent until you are broken. You must agree."

"No," Luke said. "You have to know I'll die before I'll help you."

"Then you will die," Tharkus said flatly.

He lifted a hand to signal the doctor to start, but paused as a voice called out:

"There's a group coming in!"

He turned along with the others to look toward the approaching band. First across the beach toward them strode Han, Chewie, Valladian, and the droid. Behind them moved Gowan and Leia, the man urging on the rest with a blaster to her head.

"Leia!" said Luke in anguish. "Han!"

"Senator Valladian," said Tharkus with surprise. "Just what is it we have here?"

"Take their weapons and cover them," Kantos ordered a squad, and the stormtroopers moved out to surrounded and disarm the little group as it came up to the war machine.

"They were going to try a rescue, High Admiral," Gowan explained smugly. "They followed you here in the Millennium Falcon."

"So, you escaped after all," said Tharkus, "and Valladian with you." He looked to Gowan. "And who are you?"

"You know, Sir," the young man said.

In an instant, light enveloped his body. In a few more seconds he was another cadaverous being of bluish, translucent skin.

"Kastor," said Tharkus.

"My brother!" said the other shape-shifter joyously, moving up to embrace his twin.

"Gowan!" said Leia, who, with her comrades had watched the transformation in horror. "What's happened to him?"

"Probably dead," Luke said.

"Indeed so," said the being called Kastor. "I intercepted the young Prince of Galvoni III when he first arrived at your new base."

"It was Kastor's idea to go there," said his brother, patting the other pridefully. "To provide some alternative plan should the droid fail."

"The prince provided the perfect disguise," added the twin. "Not a difficult identity to assume. Really a very shallow man. The precaution was rewarding for us too, as you survived the ambush on Pellkadarr. It put me in the ideal spot to guarantee you wouldn't interfere."

"But, you could have been killed *with* us in the attack." said Leia.

"A small price to pay for a successful mission," the being said stolidly.

"You see that their skill in deception is overmatched only by their loyalty," said Tharkus. "I congratulate you both."

"Good thing you didn't get any closer to the little creep, Leia," said Han.

"Solo!" the shape shifter grated angrily.

He stepped up and whipped Han sideways across the skull with the blaster's barrel. Han staggered back, hand going to a ragged cut on his temple.

"I promised you that for your treatment of me," Kastor said. "You deserve more!"

"You can have your fun with them later," said Tharkus. "For now, we need them alive and intact."

"What do you mean?" asked Leia.

"Your young friend here, whom you were so anxious to save, has been reluctant to aide us," he explained. "He said that he would die before any power of ours might persuade him. Now it will not be necessary to find out. Doctor, disconnect him."

"Disconnect?" said the man in dismay. "But, my machine..."

"You will have to test it on someone else. We have been given by fortune a much more certain way of bringing Skywalker to behave. Do it!"

"It never fails," the man grumbled, but moved to detach the wires from Luke's hands and feet.

As he did, Tharkus moved up close to speak to Luke.

"How about it, young Jedi? You would not act to save your own life. Will you act to save the lives of your friends?"

"Luke," Han called, "what's he want you to do?"

"Take him inside the temple," the Jedi replied. "They think they can disrupt the Force that way."

"*What*? How?"

"There's... there's something in there."

"*The Heart of the Jedi*, it's called," Tharkus supplied. "A kind of link to the Force's pure flow in the Galaxy. Soon it will cease to flow to your Rebel cause."

"Pure Force," said Leia. "No wonder I've been..."

She cut off abruptly, clearly realizing she might reveal too much of her own powers. But Tharkus still picked up on it:

"You've felt its influence too?" he said. "So have I. Like the charged air before an electrical storm. It seems to heighten the senses. Most exhilarating."

"Would you really hurt them if I don't obey?" asked Luke, purposely drawing the man's attention from the Force and his sister back to himself.

"You believe that I would bluff you?" asked the high admiral with a smile. "If you could see the wreckage drifting not far from this planet, you would not doubt my ruthlessness."

"*We* saw it," said Han. "You wiped out hundreds of unarmed ships."

"The refugee fleet?" said Luke, aghast.

"That's right. Plus, he slaughtered a bunch of his own senators. The whole Peace Committee."

"Except for Valladian," said Tharkus thoughtfully. "You are more tenacious then I'd first thought, old man."

"Yes," the senator said boldly. "Your trap missed me. Your scheme has failed."

"On the contrary," the other countered. "It's gone quite well." He turned and strode to the ring of stormtroopers as he went on: "At this very moment, the rumor is spreading that it was the treacherous Rebels who tricked our poor and misguided senators just to massacre them." He stopped before a trooper, his back to the prisoners. "A renewed war fever is no doubt becoming quite rampant now."

"Except that I know otherwise," said Valladian.

"Yes." Tharkus spun around with the trooper's blaster in his hands. "Unfortunate you pointed that out—for you."

He fired once. The bolt struck Valladian squarely in his chest, jerking him back as it pierced through to erupt from his spine. The senator toppled limply, dead before he hit the sand.

Leia gasped in horror at this swift, brutal murder of an old friend. Han and Luke were clearly also jolted by the callous act, staring in stunned disbelief. Even the Wookiee gave out a sharp bark of surprise.

"Do you have any more doubts of my sincerity?" Tharkus asked Luke. He swung the blaster's muzzle across the rest. "Or shall I demonstrate further?"

"Luke, you can't let him get to the Force," Han said.

"Let him kill us," said Leia staunchly, her anguished look for Valladian giving way to a resolute one as she steeled herself again. "Stopping the Empire is the only important thing."

Luke's agonized gaze went from them to the hard-faced high admiral. He hesitated, and then nodded defeatedly. "I'll take you in."

"Let him down," Tharkus ordered.

Troopers moved in to release him from the poles. Once he was free, Leia ran to him.

"Oh, Luke," she said desperately, "you shouldn't do it."

"As long as there's some life, there's still a chance," he murmured back.

Troopers yanked her away and roughly pushed her back to the group. Han threw a protective arm around her, and Chewie snarled warningly. The troopers swiftly backed off.

"I'll need my lightsaber." Luke said to the high admiral. "I might have to use it."

"Nice try," Tharkus said with a smile. "But I'll just carry it along for you, in case it should it be needed."

"What about them?" Luke asked, nodding to his friends.

"They will be taken onto our transport here and confined under guard. Quite safely tucked away awaiting the outcome."

"You'll promise to release them afterward?"

"Once I have dealt with the Force, why not?" Tharkus told him. "They will be powerless to stop me, as will your fledgling *New Republic*."

"Let's get it over with then," said Luke.

"Take them in, Kantos," commanded the high admiral.

"May the Force be... well, good Luck," Han called to Luke as the surrounding stormtroopers closed in.

At the general's direction, the four were prodded up the gangway into the armored machine. Han, the last, noted a sleek head peek up from the water some way offshore to watch him vanish inside.

They were pushed along a gloomy corridor to its far end. A heavy hatch was opened. They were shoved into the bare, metal-walled cell beyond. The door clanged shut.

Han, still holding his bleeding head wound, looked around the room. It was deeply shadowed except for a round patch of illumination in the center from a single ceiling light.

"Nice, cheery place," he said.

"Let me see to that cut," said Leia, lifting hands toward it.

"Hold it," he said, grabbing the hands and stiffening. "What's that?"

He looked into a dark corner. From it a small beeping sound came. Then a cylindrical form rolled out into the light.

"Artoo!" said Leia.

It tweetled and squeaked excitedly.

"It says that it came here with Master Luke," C-3PO translated.

At his voice, the little droid gave a squeal and rolled to its metal friend, twittering happily.

"I am C-3PO, human-cyborg relations," the gold droid said in its monotone, looking down at Artoo. "What unit-designation are you?"

"I'm sorry, Artoo," said Leia. "Some awful thing of the Empire wiped his personality clean. I'm afraid he doesn't know you."

At this R2 gave a low, long keen of grief and put its round head up against his side.

Luke led Tharkus, the twin shapeshifters, and a dozen stormtroopers to the wall of the Jedi temple. Luke's lightsaber now dangled on the high admiral's belt.

"Very well. Now what?" the high admiral said. "Have you some form of key?"

"I don't know," Luke told him truthfully. "It's only the true Jedi's will that's supposed to allow me to get in here. I may not have it."

"For your friends' sakes, I hope you do," Tharkus said curtly. "Try something."

"Well, this worked before," Luke said.

He sat down cross-legged before the wall. As the others watched, he concentrated his full effort on the smooth surface of stone, face drawn in hard lines as he tensed, body quivering with strain.

Within his mind an image of Yoda came—a memory of a past talk.

"Does the Force control your actions?" he heard himself asking.

"Yes, but it also obeys your commands," the Jedi master replied.

Then Yoda's face became that of Obi-Wan saying gravely, "Never doubt the Force, Luke."

"Never doubt," the young Jedi repeated in his mind. He lifted both hands toward the wall, spread wide. He concentrated his full will upon the smooth and seamless surface before him.

A section of the wall began to waver, becoming filmy and insubstantial, like an image glimpsed through a heat haze. Then, as if it were a mirage on the desert, it simply vanished away.

In the place of the piece of solid wall was now an arched portal, both high and wide, apparently cut neatly from the stone. They all moved forward to examine it curiously.

Tharkus looked up at the pointed arch fifty feet above him and at the twenty-foot thickness of the wall as he led the way on through it. The twins walked side-by-side just behind him, with Luke and the guarding troopers bringing up the rear.

As Tharkus stepped into the temple, he recoiled and stopped, his look shocked. The others moved up behind to see what he had seen.

A humanoid skeleton in the tattered remains of clothes lay stretched on the ground before them, bony arms stretched out before it as if in supplication.

"What happened to him?" asked one of the shapeshifters in revulsion.

"I'm not sure," said Luke. "It could be he was strong enough in the Force to open the doorway, but not strong enough to keep it open after he was inside. So he got trapped."

"Then the *Force* killed him," said the other twin.

"The Force doesn't act aggressively against life," Luke told him. "This one killed himself trying to achieve something he wasn't entitled to." He looked to Tharkus, adding pointedly, "Are you certain you want to continue? I may not be strong enough to keep this door open myself. And if something happens to me, it's pretty sure *you'll* never get out."

"I'll take my chances," Tharkus said firmly. "Move on."

Luke gazed carefully around him. A wide, curved corridor between walls curved away out of sight in both directions. To the right, another opening leading on into the temple was visible.

Luke considered, standing rock-still, head cocked as if listening. Then he nodded.

"All right," he said and pointed to the left. "That way."

"I can see an opening the other way," said Tharkus.

"The wrong way."

"But..."

"High Admiral, you have to trust me," Luke told him. "Do you want me to lead you in or not?"

"Very well," he acceded. "Let him go ahead," he ordered the troopers. "But not too far. And keep him well covered."

Luke began to walk along the corridor, the others close behind. Some looked back to see the doorway into the forbidding place vanish behind the bend. Others looked up at the sheer, unclimbable walls looming high above.

Another wall appeared some way ahead, blocking the corridor, forming a dead end. But before reaching it they came upon another opening leading to the interior. The young Jedi led them through it.

"There are lots of blind alleys," Luke commented as he turned left along the new corridor. "The whole temple is really a gigantic maze."

"There must be hundreds of miles of it," one shape-shifter said.

"And just how do *you* know the way, Jedi?" Tharkus asked Luke.

"The Force again. It's another test of my powers. I can sense the Heart inside. It's leading me. Without that, we'd be lost."

They came upon the grisly evidence of this soon. As they came through yet another opening into a new corridor, they found that in one direction it ended shortly in a blocking wall. In the corner of the

dead-end crouched another skeleton, the legs drawn up close, enwrapped by its arms.

"Looks like this one just gave up and sat down to die," said Luke. "I wonder how many more there are scattered around in these blind alleys."

"Just keep going," Tharkus urged.

And they went on, moving ever deeper into the vast labyrinth.

CHAPTER 29

Leia finished tying a handkerchief of her own around Han's head to bandage his wound.

"Thanks," he said. He looked at the dangling tails of the gaily colored piece of cloth. "Kinda flashy, ain't it?"

"I think it makes you look rather dashing," she said, and leaned forward to kiss him hard on the lips in a no-nonsense way.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"For luck," she said.

"Yeah, well we're sure gonna need it this time." He got up. "How's it going, Chewie?"

The Wookiee was closely examining the door. He shook his head and growled dejectedly.

"No good huh?" said Han. "Look, let's try some good ol' force. And I mean the muscle kind."

He and Chewbacca strained and grunted as they tried to push the hatch open. It didn't budge. Han stopped abruptly, putting a hand to his lower back.

"Ow. I think I hurt myself," he said. "I'm gettin' too old for this."

Squawks and a tootling sound came from Artoo. They looked around to it. The little droid had thrust out one of its many maintenance appendages and was preparing to insert the jack at its end into an outlet on Threepio's back.

"What the heck's he doing?" Han asked the Wookiee.

Chewie could only scratch his head in a puzzled way.

The jack went home. A high-pitched hum came from Artoo. The lights in the golden droid's eyes flickered, went out, and then came back on stronger. The little droid removed the plug and withdrew the rod. A faint chuckling sort of sound came from

Threepio's mouth. Then his voice spoke, but with a much different, more anxious and familiar tone:

"Oh dear! What's happened to me? Where am I?" His head swiveled as he looked nervously around.

"Threepio!" said Leia, stepping toward him. "You're back!"

"Oh, Princess Leia," he said in relief. "I'm so glad you're here... wherever *here* is. I've had such a disturbing time lately."

"You were captured and brainwashed," she said.

"I'd say I'd had a nightmare," he went on, "if droids could have such things. I feel oddly..." He cut off and did a double-take in realization. "Did you say *captured*? *Brainwashed*?"

"The Empire did it," Han said, looking amazed by the recovery. "We thought it was permanent."

"We thought we'd lost you forever," Leia said, hugging the droid. "What happened? How did Artoo fix you?"

"It's quite simple, Mistress Leia," he said. "Artoo is my counterpart. We share everything, including our cognitive modules — in a manner of speaking. Should an emergency arise and damage either of our vital systems, each of us carries a back-up set of the other's memory banks and programming. He only had to load them back into me to restore my higher thought functions completely. Though I must admit there are some gaps in my memory. Has anything been happening?"

"Not really," Han said dryly.

"Threepio," said Leia, "it's too much to explain now, but we've been captured by the Empire and are prisoners in one of their sea-going armored transports."

"Oh my," the droid said in some distress. "I hope my own little... *aberration* wasn't the cause."

"No more than any of our mistakes," said Han. "The Empire's been playing us all for saps, and we're gonna do something about it."

"Luke's in danger," Leia explained to the droid. "And the whole balance of the Force may be too. We have to find a way out of here."

"Master Luke!" said Threepio. "That *is* serious. Do you suppose we might...?"

He cut off as a faint vibration shook the ship.

"What is it?" asked Leia.

There came more. Like small impacts against the hull from outside, quickly increasing in frequency.

"Something is hitting us," said Threepio. "Quite a number of somethings, in fact."

"No kidding!" said Han.

Leia's face had taken on an odd, faraway expression.

"I can feel it," she said. "I can hear it in my mind. It's those sea creatures, the Lazhuwan. They're swarming around the ship. There are hundreds already, and more coming."

"Great," said Han. "But what can they do?"

In the now-shaking control room of the armored Swimmer, General Kantos was at the moment also asking, "What can they do to us?"

"I don't know," said a junior officer at the command console. "There must be over a thousand out there. They've surrounded us. Look."

Kantos moved up beside him to peer at a bank of monitors. External cameras showed various images of bodies solidly packed in around the AT-AT, whipping the water to a white foam with thrashing tails as they thrust noses hard against the ship's sides.

"What's making them do that?" he asked.

"Some type of feeding frenzy, maybe," the officer suggested. "They might believe we're food."

"Brilliant guess," Kantos said sarcastically. "Well, let them bang away all they want to. It can't do us any harm."

But even as he said this, the vibrations of multiple strikes altered to become a more even shuddering, and then a rhythmic rocking sensation.

"General, they are acting in concert now," the officer said in amazement, "pushing back and forth on each side alternately."

"Acting together?" Kantos said. "They're just fish! They can't be!"

"Look for yourself!" the man said sharply. "They are!"

Down in the cell the prisoners were also well aware of the new rocking motion.

"Are they doing that too?" asked Han.

"Yes," said Leia. "They're working together, using the combined powers of the Force as one. They're moving the whole machine."

"That still doesn't get us out of here," he said. "We might be able to use the distraction to escape though, if we could open the blasted door. But I can't rewire its locking mechanism unless I can get inside it."

"Oh, I believe Artoo can take care of that for you, Master Solo," commented Threepio.

Han looked in surprise at the droid. "He can? Well, why didn't you say so before?"

"You didn't ask before," was the simple reply.

"Didn't ask!" Han said, advancing angrily on the droid. "Why you clanking collection of…"

"Ah, ah!" Leia called warningly to him. "Where is our new, kinder Han?"

"Oh, yeah," he said, abashed. "I forgot." He stepped back from the droid. "Sorry, Threepio."

"Sorry?" the golden being echoed in surprise. "Master Solo, isn't that rather unusual of you?"

"We've all been through a lot of changes, pal," he replied. "Now Artoo, get to work!"

The rocking was swiftly growing worse. In the Swimmer's control room, the crewmen were holding on to anything to prevent being thrown from their feet or seats.

"This is intolerable," Kantos raged. "Send some stormtroopers out on top. Shoot a few of those things. That should chase them away!"

The order issued, white-armored troopers clambered out through a hatch high up on the metal shell back. They moved down the railings around the edge, only yards above the water, moving with difficulty because of the slope and the rocking.

From these positions a few opened fire on the seething mass below. Blaster bolts tore through the bodies of the sleek creatures. Motionless, floating carcasses began to drift away.

Still the rest persevered, making the craft rock all the harder.

A new volley of shots was fired, this time in greater volume. But this time there was a response. A long, tapered form leapt from the water, gleaming in the sunlight.

The powerful, agile sea creature arched high in its graceful move, sweeping up past the edge of the war machine, striking a trooper's shoulder with its nose before it dove into the sea. He was knocked back, his feet sliding out from beneath him. Before he could

grab on, he was shooting under the rail, plummeting down to crash into the surging water below.

Another and another creature made the leap. Two more troopers were knocked into the sea. Then several attacks came all at once. Some missed the now-warned men, but two more struck home. The harried troopers tried to shoot them, but the leaps were too unexpected and too fast. With uncanny accuracy, the sea beings kept striking, knocking more troopers off.

And the rocking continued.

Inside the AT-AT, Artoo rolled back from a hole it had cut in the bulkhead by the door. A bundle of wires and connectors had been exposed there.

"Now," said Han examining them, "if I can just cross the right two... Ah. These!"

He pulled two wires loose and crossed their tips. The bolt of the door's heavy lock clicked open.

"Okay," Han told the rest, "now everyone stand back."

He cautiously pushed the door open a tiny crack and peeked out. An armed guard just outside was all but being bounced back-and-forth in the corridor, trying vainly to hold on.

Han waited until the man was well off-balance and turned the opposite way. Then he threw the door full open and dived out.

A tackle brought the guard down. Before he could struggle or cry out Chewie was on him, knocking him out with the sharp thump of a fist on his head.

Han took the guard's blaster pistol and got up. The others moved out to join him.

"Which way?" asked Leia.

"Let's try up," he said.

In the control room, Kantos and his crew watched monitor images of both the fight atop the Swimmer and the continued attack of the beings in the water. The numbers of Lazhuwan seemed to have doubled by this time and were still increasing. They were making the machine heave with great violence, heeling farther over on each swing.

"The troopers are having no effect, General," an officer reported. "And we're losing a lot of men."

"Trapped here against the shore, there's not much more we can do," said Kantos. "Take the craft out where we can maneuver."

The order was passed. Huge underwater exhaust vents at the craft's rear coughed grey-black fumes into the clear waters as massive propeller screws began to turn.

Inside, the escapees climbed up a ladder to another corridor. Chewie and Han bodily wrested Artoo up through the hatchway.

"You puttin' on weight, droid?" said Han, panting from the effort.

"One more level," said Leia, pointing to another hatch above. "I think it'll get us out."

"Hold it," said Han.

Clattering footsteps sounded from up the corridor. Two stormtroopers suddenly charged into view. They pulled up sharply when they saw the others, then moved swiftly to bring their weapons to bear.

Not swiftly enough. Two shots from Han knocked both to the ground.

Leia went at once to fetch the blaster carbines from the downed troopers, tossing one to Chewie. Then she led the way up the next ladder.

She paused as the steady sensation of the rocking was broken somewhat, the ship jerking more spasmodically.

"What now?" asked Han.

"The Swimmer's trying to get away," said Leia. "It's pulling out to sea!"

"Then let's get moving faster," he said.

The ship's powerful screws were churning through the water at full speed now, dragging the heavy vessel back through the swarms of creatures. Its bow cleared the shallows near the shore and it began to turn.

The rocking sensation faded more as the craft pulled free of the bulk of its attackers. But a new vibration began, as if from the engine itself choking and sputtering.

In the control room the crew consulted instruments and monitors.

"What's happening this time?" snapped Kantos.

"Those things are swimming into the main exhaust vents," reported one astonished crewman. "The exhaust blasts are blowing them back out."

"Swimming *in*?" Kantos said. "What's possessed those fish?"

Some way above him, Leia eased up the hatchway on the roof of the Swimmer and poked her head out. The half-dozen stormtroopers left were absorbed in watching the sea below.

She threw the hatch wide and climbed out, crouching with gun ready. Threepio came up behind her, then Han, dragging Artoo while Chewie pushed from below.

They had just heaved the little droid up onto the outer shell when a trooper spotted them. His hasty shot went over their heads. Leia's return bolt jolted him backwards over the rail.

Other troopers opened fire, and the air was suddenly knit with crisscrossing bolts.

"Down to the side," said Han, pointing to one area free of troopers. "We gotta get over."

They began to move cautiously down the sloped surface of armor-plate, exchanging fire at the same time. Chewie also struggled to hold onto the helpless Artoo. Threepio, with only metal toes and fingers to grip with, lost his purchase first.

"Oh dear! Oh goodness!" he cried, sweeping down the incline as if it were a slide. And "*Oh hellllllp*!" he screamed as he flew under the rail and sailed far out beyond the ship before splashing into the sea.

Chewie and Artoo went next. The big Wookiee took out a post of the rail as he went through it and belly-flopped onto the waves. Artoo shot outward like a fired bullet before arching into the water.

The image of the little band's struggle on the vessel's topside was meanwhile being observed on a monitor below.

"General, the prisoners have escaped," the watching officer reported.

"Never mind that," another man said sharply. "General, those fish are really jamming themselves into the vents now. The combined strength of them is fantastic. They're dying, but their bodies are plugging the holes."

"Let them die," Kantos said callously.

"You don't understand," said the other more urgently. "They're backing up the exhaust. The engine pressure's building!"

Values were already blowing, filling the engine compartment with fumes and smoke. Crewmen were beginning to scramble madly for safety as the pressure indicators rose toward the danger zone.

On top of the sea-going transport, Han and Leia had safely reached the rail.

"The Lazhuwan," she said, "they're sacrificing themselves to stop the swimmer. Their plugging its exhaust vents."

"That'll blow the engines," said Han. He ducked a blaster bolt and returned a snap shot that picked the man off. "We gotta get off this thing!"

In the control room, an officer cried, "General! The pressure's reached critical! We have to..."

An explosion shook the machine hard, throwing Kantos down. It was followed by another, bigger one.

On top, Leia yelled "Go!" to Han.

"What about you?" he said. "Water's not exactly your thing."

"I'll be alright," she said.

With that he shoved her off, took a deep breath, and leapt after her.

Behind him an internal explosion blew up through the hatchway in an erupting geyser of flame. Another explosion within the armored monster's bowels took engines and fuel up in one final, massive blast just as he hit the water.

The metal shell ruptured up and out, spewing debris and sparks far out around to shower down. Water rushed into the gap and the submersible made a final dive. In moments only a thinning cloud steam and some drifting remains showed the spot where it had vanished.

Han came spluttering to the surface where the big hand of Chewie grabbed Leia to hold her afloat. A number of the sea creatures were already nosed in tightly around the two droids, holding them up. Han paddled in beside Leia to give her more support.

"I've been practicing," she said with a smile, but Han thought she looked a little pale.

"What about you, goldenrod." Han said, looking around. "All in one piece?"

"Other than having water seeping into my vitals," Threepio complained.

"Okay then, friends," Han said to the creatures, "better get us back in to shore. We've still gotta get Luke!"

Luke had led the Imperials well into the temple's maze by this time with no incident.

But as they came cautiously through yet another opening and started down another corridor, the sight of what lay ahead brought them up short.

A pit filled the way from side to side.

They moved up to it. It was a good fifty feet wide—much too far for any leaping or easy bridging. They peered over its edge. It vanished into darkness far below.

"Go another way," Tharkus said simply.

"Sorry," said Luke. "No other. I've got to go this way. It's another test."

"What kind of a test? Have you the power to jump it?"

"Not me. No, it must be something else. Let me think about it."

Tharkus signaled the others back and they left Luke alone at the pit's edge.

He considered hard, focusing on the problem. A great hole was before him. Or, what *seemed* like a great hole.

Another memory came to him. This one was of Obi-Wan on the Millennium Falcon, teaching him how to parry an attack with the lightsaber. He handed Luke a helmet with a solid metal visor closed in front.

"Put this on," he suggested.

Luke donned it. "But, with the blast shield down I can't see a thing!" he protested.

"Your senses can deceive you," Obi-Wan said sagely. "Don't trust them."

"Don't trust them," the real Luke repeated as the memory faded. "Trust the Force."

He stepped to the very brink of the pit. He closed his eyes, lifted a foot, and put it out over empty space.

"He's going to..." one of the twins began, starting forward to stop Luke.

Tharkus pulled him back. "Let him go. It's his test."

"Trust the Force," Luke said again with full conviction. He shifted his weight forward. His foot went down... and stopped as if on hard ground.

Another step, another, and he was striding out across seemingly thin air. In moments he had safely reached the far side.

As he did, the hole simply vanished like another mirage, leaving the solid rock floor of the corridor. Tharkus stepped up to where it had been, gingerly put a foot down, and then drew it back.

"Well, are you coming?" asked Luke.

"Troopers first," Tharkus ordered.

The first one to the spot hesitated, and then stepped out. The ground stayed solid. He went forward, the rest following.

"How much farther?" the high admiral asked Luke as he reached him again.

"Not far enough," said Luke, eying the lightsaber swinging on Tharkus' belt.

Tharkus noted the look. "You'd like a chance to use this, wouldn't you?" he said, smiling and patting it. "Just don't forget, that won't help save your friends."

"Don't worry," Luke said darkly. "I won't!"

CHAPTER 30

Han, Leia, and Chewbacca moved through the still-opened portal and headed into the Jedi labyrinth at a run.

Artoo rolled at his fastest speed to stay with them. Threepio brought up the rear, loping awkwardly along, sea water still draining from the crevices of his metal body.

"This is most difficult and most uncomfortable!" he complained. "I'll probably be rusting in a day. This time tomorrow I won't be able to move or speak."

"That'll be a relief," Han called back in his old sardonic way. "Just hurry up, professor!"

The droid nearly crashed into the others when Leia paused as she came through the opening into a new corridor, and they pulled up with her.

"Which way now?" Han asked.

"Just a minute," she said, concentrating. Then she pointed left. "That way."

"Are you sure you're doing this right?" Han asked as they started on again.

"Yes," she said definitely. "Somehow. My own skill in the Force won't help me find my way, but I can feel Luke's presence."

"I just hope we catch up in time."

Meanwhile, Luke and his escort had reached another barrier.

A mammoth block of stone fifty feet square sat across the opening to the next corridor. And this impediment, it appeared, was no mirage.

Luke stood before it in full, quivering concentration, willing it to vanish with no avail. The stone remained quite substantial.

He ceased his effort and walked to it, touching the hard surface, looking up at the looming mass.

"Beaten, Jedi?" asked Tharkus. "Is there no other way to go?"

"No," said Luke. "The Heart lies just beyond this, I can feel it. And I have to go through here to reach it."

"Another test?"

"I assume so. But I guess a different kind of one. This stone is real."

"Then it must be moved."

"Moved," Luke repeated thoughtfully.

"Not by us," said one of the twins. "And certainly not by him. That thing must weigh hundreds of tons. It's impossible."

Yet another memory returned vividly to Luke. He saw himself in the Dagobah jungles with Yoda. The Jedi Master was training him. He was standing and watching in amazement while the little being demonstrated that his will was enough to lift Luke's own X-Wing from the mire.

"Always with you it cannot be done," he commented to Luke, who had given up his own attempt.

"I don't believe it," the young man told him.

"That is why you fail!" Yoda sternly replied.

Luke came out of the reverie. "Nothing's impossible with the Force," he resolutely said to the Imperials. "Stand back."

They obeyed, and he also stepped back from the stone. His face drew into hard lines, brow furrowing deeply as he focused himself.

Slowly the huge stone lifted. It rose several inches clear of the ground. Then it slid sideways, away from the opening.

It eased back to the ground. Luke relaxed.

"Unbelievable power!" said the high admiral in open awe.

"Just make sure he doesn't use it on us," said the shapeshifter called Kastor.

"He doesn't dare," Tharkus arrogantly assured.

"Why? Just because of his friends?" Kastor asked skeptically.

"No," put in Pollux. "He believes that for him to use the Force in attack would be to step over to the Dark Side. And that would mean defeating himself."

They passed through the final wall's opening into a central circle several hundred yards across. Around it sat a ring of twelve cylindrical, round-topped monoliths each a hundred feet high and over twenty thick. At their middle, at the whole temple's exact core, sat a single, simple structure.

Four large, flat, square slabs set on their ends supported an even bigger piece laid on top. The walls of this dolmen did not meet, leaving large gaps at the corners. Through these gaps a slowly and steadily pulsing red light could be seen.

With greater caution now, the men moved closer.

The Imperials, more timid, stopped at the structure's corners to peer through the openings. But Luke boldly stepped inside.

A single large space of some twenty yards on a side was enclosed by the massive slabs. Ten feet in from the walls was another ring of a dozen stones. These were only a dozen feet tall and tapered to a blunt tip. Affixed to each tip was what looked like a white jewel.

From each jewel a thin line of brilliant light projected inward, joining with the rest in the center to form a glowing ring like a molten silver crown. And within this crown was suspended a spherical, blood-red stone.

It had the clarity and translucence of a giant ruby formed into a polished ball. From deep within it a soft but still-strong light rhythmically throbbed brighter.

"The Heart of the Jedi," Luke breathed.

Beneath the floating stone was a round platform high enough to bring a man within arm's reach. Luke stepped toward it.

"We'd better go in too, High Admiral," one of the twins suggested. "It seems safe enough."

But as he started forward, Tharkus pulled him back. "Wait," the high-admiral said. "What's that?"

They drew back into the cover of the outer walls as a patch of haziness began to show before the platform.

Out of the haze a form surrounded by a scintillating aura of light came swiftly into view. It was that of a tall, handsome, white-robed man with a peaceful, but worn and wistful air.

"Father!" said Luke.

"Yes, my Son," said the spirit of Anakin Skywalker. "It is now my time to come to you. You have passed the tests meant for a true Jedi and achieved the inmost chamber of the Heart. You must tell me now: why do you seek it?"

"To know. To understand. To be restored."

"That knowledge you must gain through your own mind," the elder Skywalker replied. "The understanding comes from your Jedi's heart, not this one. This one can restore you and give you a greater strength, but know that in doing so, it will change you too."

"How?" asked Luke.

"Once you have touched and tasted the pure essence exposed in the wellspring of energy, a feeling of oneness with the Force will be always in you. Your desire to devote your life to it will become your all. You will feel strongly the duty to assume the arduous task of a Jedi Master and train others in the calling. This is an especially critical thing, as you are vital to reviving the Order. So there can be

no mistake. That is why the final choice must be yours. Are you prepared, my Son?"

"But Father, I'm not alone here," Luke began. "I came..."

Anakin interrupted. "I can stay no longer. What happens now must be for you to decide without me. Good-bye, Luke."

His form began to fade.

"Don't leave," Luke called after him. "The Heart is in peril."

But he was gone.

High Admiral Tharkus strode grandly into the chamber behind him, flanked by the twins. The stormtroopers followed them in, spreading out to cover Luke.

"So, it's the power to become a Master which lies in that rock," said the high admiral, a greedy glint in his eyes as he gazed on it. "The power to use the Force."

Luke turned to him. "Only for a true Jedi."

"Not any more," Tharkus said. "This time *I* will be the one to gain it."

Luke looked at him with a sudden realization. "You want it for yourself!"

"Why not?" the other admitted arrogantly. "To be the greatest power. To eclipse even the Emperor. To order things as I see fit."

"Even if you could somehow control it," Luke argued, "the Force wasn't intended to be used that way. You don't understand. It was meant only for good. If you try to turn it to aggression and destruction, the Dark Side will overwhelm you, just as it did the Emperor and my own father."

"Don't speak that weakling's drivel to me," Tharkus said harshly. "I've heard all about its supposed shining qualities. It binds. It helps. It fills every rock and insect and flower. It's harmony and

love. Garbage! The only truth is in who wields the greatest power. And if I can't turn your Force to doing that, I'll sweep this Heart, this temple, this whole planet from existence!"

"I won't let you do that," Luke told him.

Tharkus laughed scornfully. "You can't stop me. The Heart of the Jedi is in my hands. The last Jedi Knight is about to die. Any further hope of using their powers in the Rebel cause will be extinguished. Mastery over the galaxy will belong to me alone."

"Guess again," said a voice behind him.

He wheeled to see Han and his companions coming through an opening.

"Kill them!" Tharkus ordered the troopers, but Han Leia, and Chewie fired first.

Their shots took out three stormtroopers and sent the rest scrambling for cover.

As blaster fire erupted on all sides and began to burst against the stones of the room, Tharkus ran for the shelter of one of the encircling monoliths. But as he moved, Luke's beckoning hand shot out toward him. The lightsaber was ripped free of his belt and flew back to slap into the Jedi's palm. Then Luke too was diving away from a blaster bolt and rolling into the cover of the central platform.

His companions had by now found their own shelter behind stones. Leia and Han had one, Chewie another. The two droids huddled together behind a third.

The laser fire crisscrossed the ring. Luke looked around at the combatants. He looked up toward the ruby stone hanging above. It had to be protected. Yet, the superior firepower of the Imperials was pinning his friends down.

He made a decision and rose to charge a stormtrooper's position. Fire from the two behind a stone was parried by rapid swings of the saber as he crossed the open space. He fell upon the armored men and two quick cuts of the glowing blade struck them down.

The twin shapeshifters, behind another stone, saw his move.

"We must stop this," said Kastor. "They could kill us all."

"The others will be easy," said Pollux. "Skywalker is dangerous."

"I have a plan," said Kastor.

Chewbacca, meanwhile, was making his own bold move. Dodging bolts, he managed to work his way two stones further around the ring and engage a pair of troopers hiding behind the next. A bolt from his blaster took out one.

"Good work, Chewie!" Han yelled at the Wookiee while he and Leia exchanged fire with more Imperials opposite.

A snap shot of hers hit one as he leaned too far out to aim. Neither of them noticed a serpent-like creature slither swiftly into the open ground from the stone next to theirs to come up behind them. It pulled itself into a tight coil, flat head lifting high, glistening eyes fixing on the pair.

Luke attacked again, rushing to the next monolith to strike at a stormtrooper there. The man tried to use his blaster rifle to knock away the laser sword, only to have his weapon sliced in half. Luke's return swing took him down.

Four stormtroopers were left, and Chewie improved the odds even more. He charged the remaining man at the next stone, firing rapidly. One bolt clipped the man from cover, and the next went into his chest.

But when the Wookiee tried to fire on the pair at the stone beyond, no bolts shot forth. He shook the bowcaster hard and howled his frustration.

"His gun's jammed!" said Han. "Seawater!"

The stormtroopers saw it too. One signaled the other and they both attacked Chewbacca.

Leia fired. The range was long, but her shot went home, downing one man as he rushed across the open space. Chewie dodged the fire of the other, ducked around his stone, and brained the trooper with his useless weapon as the man rounded it.

"Good ol' Chewie," said Han to Leia. "As much muscle as brains."

Behind them, a glowing chrysalis rose to surround the coiled serpent. Its shadowy form within the glow swelled rapidly larger.

Across the ring, Luke was preparing to charge the final trooper when he heard a voice call him.

"Luke!"

He looked around to see a form approaching. It was that of Anakin Skywalker.

"Father?" said Luke in astonishment. "You're back!"

"You must not do this," the figure said sternly as it strode closer. "This is a Jedi Temple. A sacred place. There can't be violence here. Lay down your sword."

Luke lowered it part way. "But, Father," he said, sounding momentarily confused, "we have to defend ourselves and protect the Heart."

"No arguments, my Son," Anakin said firmly. "You are a true Jedi. You must obey. Drop the sword."

The lightsaber dropped further. Anakin eyed it approvingly. One hand moved into his robe.

But then the remembered voice of Obi-Wan sounded warningly in Luke's mind:

"Don't trust your senses!"

Luke shook off the confusion and focused hard on the advancing man. He saw there, superimposed on the form of Anakin, a swiftly shifting montage of ephemeral shapes that included an Alliance pilot, a jawa, a Tusken Raider, a leathery flying creature, and an Ewok.

Luke also saw the blaster pistol hidden inside the figure's robe.

"Not this time, 'mate'!" he said, and swung the saber out in a flat, hard stroke.

It slashed through the neck of Anakin. But as the head flew off and rolled away in a spray of sparkling purple blood, it transformed into that of the twin called Pollux. Likewise, the toppling body shrank back into the being's true, cadaverous form.

While Luke was thus distracted, the last stormtrooper tried to make a break for an opening in the outer walls. But a shot from Han stopped him before he made it.

"That takes care of 'em!" Han said with satisfaction.

"Not quite," said a gruff voice behind him.

Both he and Leia looked around. The serpent form had now transformed to that of a reptilian beast, a deadly rolk-mahgir. It squatted on massive haunches, huge clawed hands thrust out on sinewy forearms. Atop twelve feet of scaled and muscled body loomed an oval head with wide, tooth-lined jaws.

It lunged at the startled pair. One hand shot out, knocking Han back to slam against the rock. Stunned, he slid to the ground.

The beast's other hand swept the blaster from Leia's hands, and then it grabbed her, enclosing her torso in a fist.

She cried out and pounded futilely at the entrapping claws. Her voice alerted Luke who looked across to see them. He started across the circle at a run.

Forgotten in the confusion, Tharkus peeped out from his own hiding place. He watched Luke go past the suspended Heart and saw his chance to act. He rushed out behind the Jedi, heading for the central platform.

The struggling Leia saw Luke coming, then spotted Tharkus behind. Ignoring her own jeopardy she called out, "Luke, the high admiral!"

Midway between her and the Heart, Luke stopped and looked around. Tharkus had just reached the platform.

"Stop him!" she bravely shouted as the beast lifted her toward its open, slavering jaws.

Luke turned toward Tharkus. He lifted the lightsaber, hesitated, then cast it.

It went spinning across the ring, but not toward Tharkus. Instead the weapon struck the huge creature, driving the full length of the glowing blade into its side.

It howled in pain and began instantly to shrivel grotesquely, like a punctured balloon. Its dwindling hand released Leia as it collapsed onto one side, shrinking back into the scrawny, blue-white form of Kastor. The lightsaber had impaled his bony chest from side-to-side, skewering the purple mass of his visible heart.

Unarmed, Luke turned back toward the high admiral. The man had mounted the pedestal.

"Now!" Tharkus said with gloating grin, raising his hands toward the ruby orb. "Now the power is finally mine!"

His fingertips touched its surface.

The triumphant smile on his face froze there as his body was drawn instantly taut, held quivering as if an enormous electrical current ran through it. His mouth dropped open. From it, his nostrils, his ears, and his staring eye sockets burst into bright shafts of ruby light. Then the head was engulfed in the flow of crimson glow that swiftly spread down over the whole body, consuming it as would an intense fire.

The light receded, drawing back into the red globe. A sticklike bundle of charred bones toppled from the platform, clattering to the ground.

Luke walked slowly out across the ring, approaching the Heart and wasted form of what had been Tharkus. Leia helped a breathless but recovering Han up and they joined him, along with Chewie and the droids. Together they gazed down upon the ghastly remains.

"I told him he couldn't control it," said Luke, looking at the blackened, gape-jawed skull.

"No, but *you* can," said Leia with sudden intensity, looking to him. "I feel it. You've proven you're a true Jedi. You've won the right."

"Have I?" he said, looking up at the pulsing stone. "Was I acting in defense to save you from Kastor? Was there hatred and revenge in me when I killed Pollux?" He shook his head. "I'm just not sure I know what a true Jedi should have done."

He turned to her, speaking emphatically: "Do you see Leia? I don't deserve this. At least, not yet. I *could* touch the pure Force here, but I *won't*. Our world, this mortal and material world, is still

too much with me. Yoda was right. My motive for coming here was a selfish one. I've still got a lot to learn. Until I do, I know I'm not ready. I have a choice, and I choose to wait."

She looked into his eyes a long moment, then put a hand on his arm. "I understand," she assured him.

"Look," Han said anxiously, "I don't wanna break in on this moment, but if you really are through here, then we ought to get out. And fast. Come on!"

CHAPTER 31

"There's still a Star Destroyer up there," Han reminded his comrades as they made their way out of the labyrinth at a run. "Sooner or later it's gonna figure something's wrong. Then it's gonna send more men down here."

Up on the Imperial battleship, Captain Vaskor was at the moment being forced to consider just that.

The aide named Voss approached him.

"Captain, there's been no contact with the high admiral or the general for some time," Voss said. I think we should land another party."

"I was given no orders on that," the Captain tersely replied. "The high admiral took only personally hand-picked men with him. He has kept completely secret the purpose of his mission here. I propose we wait. I, for one, do not intend to draw his wrath with unnecessary interfering."

"But, Captain..." began Voss.

"I say we wait!" Vaskor said with more force. "At least for a short time more."

So they waited, while below Luke and his companions made their way back through the corridors and finally left the Jedi temple.

As Luke, the last of them, came out through the portal, it re-closed behind him. Without the will of a Jedi to maintain it, the opening healed up to become a solid wall once more.

"Good," said Luke, looking back to it. "The Heart is protected again."

"Never mind it," Han said sharply. "We've gotta make a getaway before a flock of TIE fighters starts buzzin' us. Could be any minute!"

"The Millennium Falcon is too far away for us to reach quickly," pointed out Leia, "even if the Lazhuwan could help us again."

"We can take my shuttle," suggested Luke, pointing to it.

"I hate leaving the ol' girl behind," Han said regretfully. "But there doesn't seem much choice right now. Come on!"

"Han, what about that Star Destroyer?" Luke asked as they ran for his ship. "It could still attack the Heart. It could bring back a fleet with enough firepower to wipe out the whole planet!"

"Why don't we worry about savin' ourselves first, kid," Han said practically. "Let's just get off this pond."

They reached the scow's little shuttle and crowded inside. In moments it was lifting off.

On the orbiting dreadnought, a bridge crewman noted the ship's sudden appearance on his sensor monitor.

"Captain Vaskor," he called, "a small vessel has just taken off from the planet. I make it to be the *Entrepreneur*'s shuttle craft."

"You see?" Voss said emphatically. "I told you. Something *must* be wrong."

"Very well," the captain conceded. He turned to another officer. "Ready a landing party," he ordered. "And prepare to fire on that shuttle."

First bolts from the man-of-war's turbolaser batteries flashed by the tiny craft as it lifted through the stratosphere.

"I think they spotted us," said Han.

"I'll use the scow for cover," said Luke.

He piloted the ship on upward, skillfully evading more shots, to bring it behind the square mass of the salvage ship. But soon the laser bolts were slamming into the hapless scow.

"Great," said Han. "What now? This hulk's only gonna last a little longer."

"Then we'll just have to chance making a run for it," Luke answered, preparing to boldly fly them out of there.

"Wait! What's that?" cried Leia, pointing to an object on another monitor.

Something was flying in toward them from deep space. It appeared to be a disk.

"It's the bioship," Luke told her. Quickly he got on the shuttle's subspace radio. "Hello, bioship. What are you doing?"

"I've got no weapons," a familiar, resolute voice returned. "So I'm gonna ram that thing."

"Storm!" Luke identified. "You'll kill everyone."

"Only me, friend. All the rest evacuated. Don't worry. I'm fine. This is *my* choice! I won't sacrifice others, but I'll gladly sacrifice myself for the greater good."

On the Star Destroyer, another monitoring crewman called to Vaskor:

"Captain, I'm picking up another ship coming in from our port."

"What?" said Vaskor absently. All his attention was on the scow to starboard. It was much riddled by now, but its thick plate was still stubbornly standing up to the heavy fire.

"Another ship," the man repeated more urgently. "A large one. Circular configuration."

"That blossom ship?" Vaskor said in astonishment. "It can't be. We destroyed it."

"Apparently not, Sir."

"All right then," Vaskor snapped impatiently. "What's its bearing?"

The man consulted his readouts, and then looked up to Vaskor in alarm. "Sir, it's heading straight for us!"

"Evasive maneuvers!" Vaskor ordered in a shout. "Turn all guns to port. Full fire on it!"

Warning klaxons blared. The ship began a turn. A few batteries came around to bear and opened fire.

They were not enough. One bolt struck the bioship, blasting off a petal. It began to spin but continued straight on in.

Storm watched the big warship through the dome with a grim smile.

"Here's one for all the Children, you murdering scum," he said as he struck home.

The flower-like ship slammed vertically into the center of the man-of-war. The rotating disk of it was like a buzzsaw chewing into a log. It sliced into the control tower, ripping it open. Vaskor and Voss died instantly.

A vast explosion engulfed both vessels. It annihilated the fragile bioship, destroying its last ecosystems and the courageous Storm. It blew the Star Destroyer apart, sending the pointed bow spinning away into space and the broad stern streaking down to burn in the planet's atmosphere. The few surviving remains of it rained down to be swallowed by the sea.

"So much for the Empire," Han said.

"And Storm," Luke added sadly. "One more sacrifice to stop the Imperial threat. And there'll be a lot more before it's over. I know that now."

"Why don't we go get the Falcon," Han suggested.

"And say 'thanks' to the Lazhuwan," put in Leia. "They made a great sacrifice too."

The Millennium Falcon soared upward from the temple island, carrying the band of friends away from Angorathea. Han and Chewie sat in their usual seats at the cockpit's front, Leia and Luke behind them.

"So, what about all this, Luke?" Han asked as he steered them way into space. "I mean, your coming here. Was that all a bust?"

"No," the younger man said thoughtfully. "I wanted knowledge. I got that coming here. I was looking for an identity, and I found one... for now." He looked to them and spoke slowly, earnestly: "What I've got to do is help you, help the Alliance, until we're sure the power of the Empire can never be restored. Until then, there's no room for anything else." He looked at the azure globe of the planet receding in a rearview monitor. "Maybe after that—if I think I'm ready—*then* I'll come back here."

Leia put a hand on his arm and gazed at the planet with him. "Someday, I may too."

"But for now," put in Han, "where to?"

"Home," Luke announced determinedly.

"You mean, back to Tatooine?" said Han.

Luke shook his head. "Back to the Alliance base on Torbraleen. I've a feeling there's going to be a lot to do."

"Well, all right then," Han said with elation. "Let's go. Ready to make the jump, Chewie!"

He pushed the drive levers forward to light speed. The Millennium Falcon leaped ahead into its hyperspace tunnel of light and vanished away.

Behind it, Angorathea and its Heart of the Jedi lay once more alone and waiting.

The History of *Heart of the Jedi* and How it Didn't Get Published

By Kenneth C. Flint

In 1991, I was making my living as an author. I was writing two books a year for Spectra, the sci-fi-fantasy imprint of Bantam Doubleday Dell. I'd had twelve books published, with a seven book backlist and a million books in print. I had just signed a new two book contract with Spectra, with titles to be decided later. Then I got an exciting word from my editor.

Because of the success of a hardcover Star Wars trilogy by Timothy Zahn, Lucasfilm had asked Spectra to publish an additional series of paperbacks. Spectra had searched through its stable for suitable authors, sending copies of our works to Lucasfilm for selection. My books were Celtic-based sword-and sorcery, but my *Sidhe* series books were a fantasy/sci-fi combination, and a review of *Riders of the Sidhe* said it "has enough derring-do for at least one Lucas film."

Apparently George Lucas thought so too, because I was told he had personally selected me to do a Star Wars book. Even better, I would be writing Book One of the proposed series, taking place immediately after the second Death Star is destroyed [Note: This would have been followed by Margaret Weiss' *Legacy of Doom*, with both books to be preceded by Jim Baikie's *Exiles of the Force* four-part comic-book mini-series from Dark Horse Comics. Weiss later stated that she'd had a disagreement with Lucasfilm, and Baikie's series was cancelled –Ed.] Being a crazy big Star Wars fan (I saw the first movie seven times in the theater and drank my coffee from a Star Wars mug), you can imagine how thrilled I was.

I was given pretty much free rein on developing my plot, other than that it should take place immediately after the second Death Star is destroyed. I up front figured it would be most logical to deal with a defeated but not destroyed Empire, its military desperately trying to regroup and retaliate against the Alliance, while other

elements sought to make peace. Along with this was my assumption that I had to deal with what Luke Skywalker had become, and where he was going as a Jedi.

I spent the first months developing an outline and submitted it to my editor. I want to make the point, here, that I *never*, throughout all this, communicated directly with the Lucasfilm people or knew who they were. I worked for Spectra, and everything came through my editor. But I was told, and *very* honored to hear, that George Lucas himself had approved my plot, with one specific alteration—I had shown Sand People without their masks, and he said that that must *never* happen.

I spent most of the next year writing that book, putting my own books aside. My primary sources were the movies themselves, which I watched over-and-over (often in slo-mo), and a Star Wars Sourcebook for game players from West End Games that Lucasfilm supplied. By the end of 1992 I had a draft ready. I sent it in and waited… and waited. When I inquired as to how it was going, my editor said that the process of the Star Wars project had stalled as they developed the rest of the series. And she still had to go through it herself before sending it to Lucasfilm for their assessment. I believed her. Why not? I finally got a list of mostly minor stuff and started revisions.

After more months passed, I heard from my editor that "things were moving ahead again with the Star Wars project." I finished my revisions and submitted it. Again, I was told the Lucas people approved it. In fact, they said they "quite liked it."

Then I waited. Yet *more* months went by. I heard nothing. Stupidly, I had no agent through all this. I didn't think I needed one, as I'd always dealt directly with Spectra and been fairly treated. Finally, growing concerned, I contacted an agent who contacted

Spectra. He discovered only then that Spectra had determined my book couldn't be published because it "no longer fit into the sequence for the new series."

I was told that this happened because of my Spectra editor. She had supposedly promised another author of the group (a friend of hers, according to one source) that her book would be placed in Position One. This apparently accounted for the "delays" that I had been told about, while she wrote her own book to slip into my slot while I sat idle and ignorant of what was happening for months. I have made a point of not knowing who this other author is, and I have never been able to bring myself to read her book, or any other of the subsequent series, saddened that this so violated my love of everything Star Wars.

Did I confront Lucasfilm and try to fight this situation? Nope. I didn't know who to contact or how, remember. I worked for Spectra. I had no resources of my own, I was pitifully naïve, and I felt pretty much powerless by that point.

Oh, they graciously let me keep the ten thousand dollar advance. And they threw me a bone letting me still do two Star Wars short stories (for *Tales from Jabba's Palace* and *Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina*), but I was done otherwise. None of my own books came out as the debacle went on (I would normally have published four new ones during this time). I lost my backlist of Irish books. Because of the long delay, my family pretty much lived on my advance for two years on expectation of the eventual payday from the Star Wars book.

This basically destroyed my relationship with Spectra and my career as I writer. I felt completely betrayed, and I was so depressed that I quit writing for years. Needing money to support my family

with two young sons, I found a job as a Publications Consultant (meaning, tech writer) and, after another ten years, finally made up the financial loss of being all but unemployed for two years.

Finally, nearing sixty years old and with the boys both adults and employed, I decided to semi-retire and work on a book idea that had enthused me enough to try writing again… But not sci-fi or fantasy. It was to be a Civil War adventure with a Jules Vernesque plotline that had a band of Confederate agents trying to save the South by destroying Washington DC with the world's first Weapon of Mass Destruction. It would be called *NITRO!*

I went back to teaching as an English department adjunct for the University of Nebraska at Omaha (my alma mater) and got the book written. I then discovered that, nowadays, an author of fiction can't even submit a book to a publisher without going through an agent.

I searched for an agent for a couple of years, but found no one. It seems that unless they are sure they can sell a specific book of yours, they won't handle you. I guess that seems fair. And I had been out of the business (by my own choice) a long time.

But then I got a new chance. An online publisher agreed to put out all my old novels as e-books. He also published my new book, now called *Ironclad*.

I've written other things too, since then. My family does living history at the reconstructed 1820's frontier outpost called Fort Atkinson (near Omaha). I started a series of historical novels based at the place, and got a history book of the fort published through Arcadia.

So my old fans can still find my books through Amazon. But, man, I'd *love* to get *Ironclad* put out as a physical book, and I still

have ideas for other fantasy, sci-fi, and horror plots, plus the twenty or so other Celtic/Irish books I'd still like to write. I think I've got at least a few viable years of authorship in me. (So, if anybody knows of somebody who'd like to represent me, I am ready to start writing two books a year again.) Otherwise, I am quite content teaching some writing classes and being the school time daycare for my two grandsons, age 4 years and 1 year.

EDITING NOTES

By Joe Bongiorno

As there have been some questions regarding what the editing process for this manuscript has been, I'd like to briefly elucidate here the process by which Ken and I approached this manuscript.

For starters, I run a small-press publishing company called The Royal Publisher of Oz and am the creator of www.starwarstimeline.net. I'm also a professional editor and writer and can state from having read manuscripts from both established authors and new talents that *every* manuscript requires some kind of editing, much of it in relatively minor areas that, if not caught, can annoy or distract the reader. At times, there are more serious structural issues, narrative problems or character concerns that need to be addressed. For an editor who deals with works that are part of a larger series (like the Oz books or Star Wars), there's an additional task that's just as important, and that—as some of you may know—is ensuring harmonious continuity across the spectrum of the series. While some readers are better at reconciling contradictions internally, for others there are few things as aggravating as continuity errors. Contradictions great and small can take the reader out of the story by spoiling the necessary verisimilitude of the individual story and the larger series.

Hypothetically, had Lucasfilm/Del Rey opted to publish *The Heart of the Jedi* today, they would have edited it for continuity. Since the manuscript fell to me to publish, I've taken that responsibility to heart (no pun intended). I'm grateful too that author Ken Flint was enthusiastic about that process. Since the story doesn't have any serious structural, narrative or character issues, my goal in editing it was to keep it as close to what you would have read in 1993. By the same token, I believe, as do many of you who've contacted me, that the story deserves its place in continuity. So, as publisher and editor, I sought to ensure that.

You might think this would have amounted to a monumental endeavor, but in the final analysis, very little was altered from the original manuscript, and whatever small changes I instigated were either authored or approved by the author. This remains his work. The initial issues had to do with the story's placement in time. Originally, it would have taken place a short while after the Battle of Endor. With *Truce at Bakura* and the post-*Jedi* Marvel series in that spot, it became a simple matter of shifting it over a few weeks after the latter event. Also, in chapter 6, in which the Imperials, Tharkos and Kantos are discussing the shapeshifter, I alteredthe dialogue slightly so that it's clear they're aware of the existence of other shapeshifters, particularly since Clawdites and Shi'ido are known in the galaxy, and it would have been odd if such high ranking Imperials had spoken as if they'd never heard of such a thing before.

I also changed the name of the planet, which had been called Gathol, to Galvoni III. Gathol sounded a little too close to Kathol (which has a very specific etymology that's part of its mystery). Galvoni III's scant history fits well with the narrative that Flint was telling.

These are the most overt changes, and I recognize that for a few of you, that still might be jarring since, for example, clawdites were invented in 2002 for *Attack of the Clones*. But that's how the Star Wars Expanded Universe has always worked, and I don't see any reason why this story should be treated with any less consideration. Apart from a few examples like these and some very minor issues (e.g., spelling, grammar, trimmed dialogue), indicative of the editing process for any story, *The Heart of the Jedi* remains essentially the same as it was in 1993.

I hope this helps readers to understand the process a little better. It's not every day we get to read a lost story, particularly from the early Bantam era, and it's a special treat at a time when there are no more Expanded Universe stories coming out. This book is certainly something to be thankful for, and particularly to author Ken Flint for his love in sharing it with us! May the Force be with you!

Kenneth C. Flint Biography

Kenneth C. Flint is the published author of eighteen fantasy, horror, and suspense novels including the best-selling *Sidhe* series based on Celtic myth. He has also published various other fiction and nonfiction works including two Star Wars short stories and a history of 1820's Fort Atkinson. His newest novel, *Ironclad*, is a Civil War adventure about a Confederate terrorist attack on Washington D.C. with the world's first Weapon of Mass Destruction.

His fantasy books--a combination of legend, history, and adventure--have been reissued in E Book format by Double Dragon Publications and are available for Kindle through Amazon. New novels are also being published including sci-fi, fantasy, history, and ancient Irish myth.

In addition to his writing, Ken is a writing instructor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and Metropolitan Community College in Omaha Nebraska. He is also a historic interpreter at reconstructed Fort Atkinson in Nebraska with his family, which includes his wife, two sons, daughter-in-law, and two grandsons.